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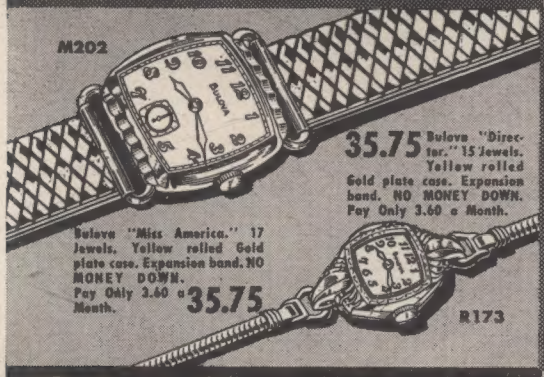

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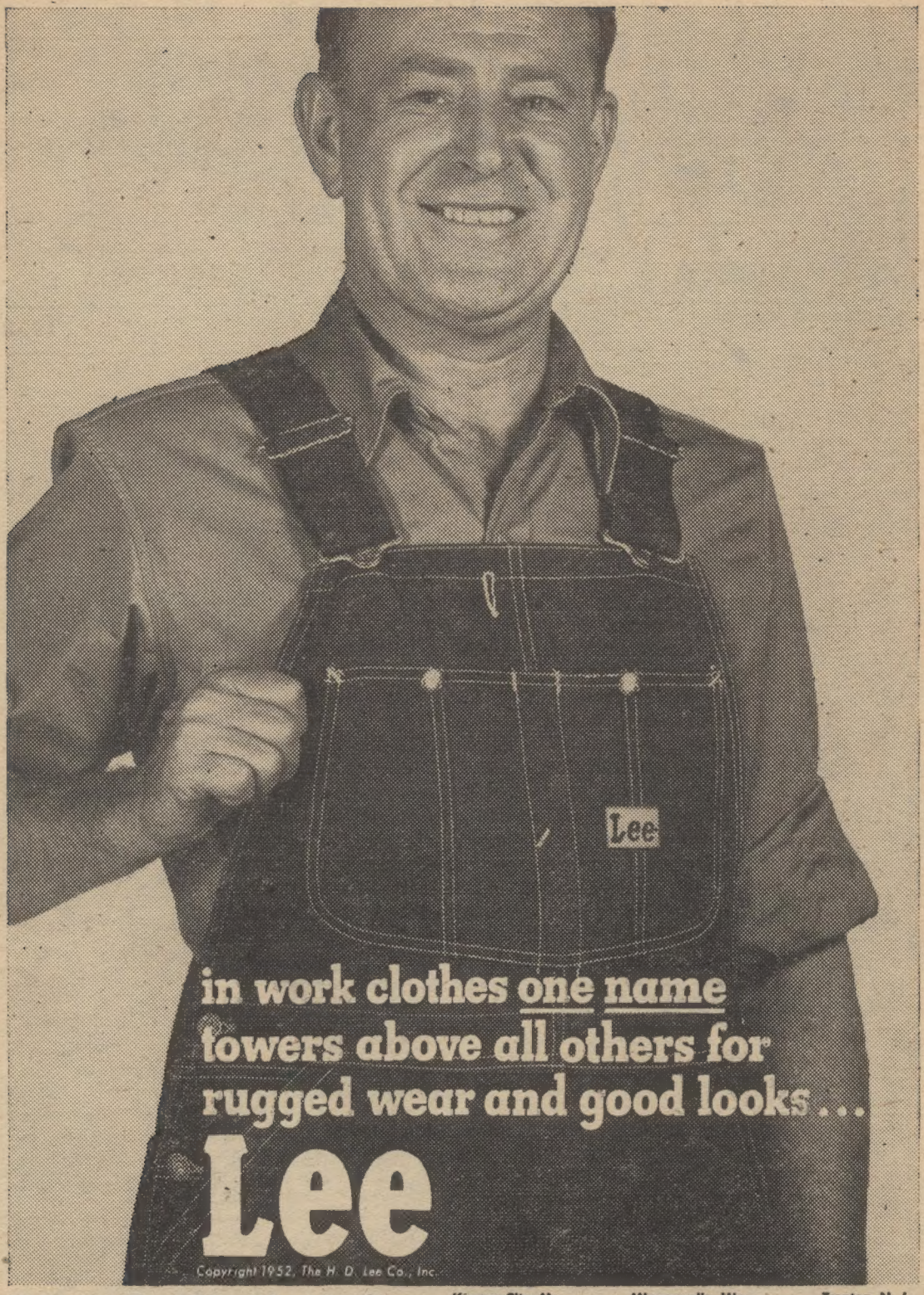

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THE IRON TRAIL

The grub was good—if you could stay around long enough to finish it!

By FREDERIC JAMES

IN MAY of 1869 the American West witnessed an event which proved to be even more momentous than those who witnessed it had predicted. On that spring day when the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific rails were joined at Promontory Point, Utah, sounds of sledge hammers on spikes were mixed with oratorical predictions equally noisy, and optimism was the watchword of the day.

When it was announced that one might now travel by rail from Chicago to San Francisco, thousands of curious travelers, both American and European, bought passage on the new line. It was known as the "Big Line" and the "Pacific Road" by those who advertised it. Westerners, perhaps more realistic, called it "two streaks of rust heading off across the prairie."

The speed of the train was not frightening even though it was advertised as a "thunderbolt express." However, its twenty miles per hour average was a tremendous advance over the wagon train, and this speed was carried on night as well as day. If the rate of travel did not impress the passengers, the splendor in which they rode surely did. They reclined on cushions, played cards, sipped at iced water, and watched less fortunate travelers struggling along on horseback.

The real attraction on the new western line was the sleeping car. It meant through travel with the opportunity of waking up refreshed, ready for another day on the rails. It was, as one described it, a "true temple of Morpheus." On the Union Pacific line George Pullman's "palace car" was the sleeper used; on the Central Pacific—west of Utah—the term "Silver Palace Car" was applied to a similar type.

What were the sleepers like? Men who had never ridden them before were delighted when the porter, with magic-like dexterity,

(Please continue on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

quickly re-arranged the seats and produced a bed three and a half feet wide, by more than six feet long. Over a hair mattress he spread fine linen sheets covered by beautiful wool blankets. As the passenger sank into this new-found comfort he pulled a heavy green and crimson curtain, striped with gold, across the opening which loked out upon the aisle, and settled down in complete privacy.

At night the four silver lamps which hung from the roof were turned low, giving what one traveler called a "dreamy light" and slippered attendants padded silently between the tiers of berths on rich Axminister carpeting. As the train moved along over the barren prairie on cold winter nights, the temperature within the cars was maintained at a comfortable seventy degrees. It was a kind of travel that brought great praise from all—especially those from Europe who saw it as a much more comfortable thing than the continental system of compartments.

IN THE years immediately following the opening of the new line, dining cars were not used and it was necessery to stop from time to time for meals. The eateries—called "beaneries" by many—were of varying quality. Westerners thought the menu was entirely satisfactory, but those from the East or from the Europe had some complaints. They thought the meals too much alike; breakfast, dinner, and supper were hard to distinguish from each other.

The menu? It might be tea, coffee, buffalo steaks, antelope chops, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and pie. It was served in a number of small dishes and the quantity offered was more than enough for the average appetite. The charge for this was usually seventy-five cents or one dollar. The difficulty was that customers were called upon to dispose of all before them in a very limited time and, as the train whistled threateningly and the conductor gave his warnings, the huge meal had to be rammed down as fast as possible.

At the larger stations there were several eateries, all of which vied with the other for patronage. They sent runners out, beating on brass gongs, to advertise the excellence of their respective cooks, and passengers were bewildered by the din which met them as the train ground to a halt for mealtime.

There were oddities on the new railroad which amused many of those who had traveled little in their lives. At the station they were warned to beware of bogus ticket sellers who might try to sell them a passage which could not be realized. Once on the train they were faced with signs cautioning them about card sharpers who roamed the cars, looking for customers. The management predicted that anyone engaging in such games would surely be robbed.

There were other signs to be obeyed. Passengers were sternly warned against spitting on the floor, and to help them in their temptation, the company placed a number of spittoons along the aisles—enough so that each two prospective spitters might have a receptacle to share. Notices on the back of their tickets told the holders that they were allowed to carry one canary free—any more would cause excess baggage rates to be levied.

When the trains got out to Nevada, still another oddity was observed. Travelers were amazed to see numbers of Indians clambering aboard, to ride between the cars—at no charge. When they asked about this unusual procedure they were told that when the Central Pacific was built the Indians were regarded as a threat to it, and to prevent any destructive conduct on their part they were offered the chance to ride for nothing. It was hoped that they would then feel that the railroad was worth protecting.

Thus the vestibules at each end of the cars were loaded with happy Indians who made a living by showing off their papooses for ten cents a look. When prank-conscious whites tried to get a look for five cents, curious to see if the red man knew the value of money, the squaws indignantly drew a blanket over the small faces peering over their shoulders, and announced that the price was double that figure.

The transcontinental railroad, and all the tree-like branches which soon grew to it, provided something more than an outlet for curiosity seekers and tourists. It meant the economic bloodstream of a new part of the nation, and without it, mining, cattle, timbering, and farming would not have developed as major industries in the region. The "two streak of rust" which threaded their way across the western wastes soon grew into iron bonds which held that land together and nursed it to maturity. The role of the railroad cannot be underestimated in the buildings of the great West—it made that building a possibility. ✪✪✪

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CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 53)

HOWDY, pardner. When it comes to knowledge of the rangeland, how do you rate . . . as top-hand or pumpkin roller? Try your hand at answering the twenty quiz questions below, and find out. Answer eighteen or more and you rank excellent. But answer fifteen or fewer, and you land in the pumpkin roller class. Good luck to you!

1. What is a good practical reason why northern cowpokes used to cut the tails from their horses at the end of the season, before turning them out on their own?

2. True or false? A "swing team" is any span of horses between the leaders and wheel horses in a jerk-line string.

3. What kind of a horse is said to be spooky?

4. True or false? Old time cowmen believed that by splitting a cow's tail blackleg could be prevented.

5. What, in the language of the cowpoke, is a "siwash outfit"?

6. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "skewbald" horse, which one of the following color combinations should you return with? A pattern of white or black? A pattern of white over a reddish-brown? Black stripes on white?

7. What is the old-time Western term, "running meat," used in reference to?

8. True of false? The term "running cattle" means "working cattle"?

9. If a cowpoke were said to be a person who "rolls his own hoop," what kind of person would he be?

10. True or false? The word "roll" is a term used in connection with roping.

11. In the West, what is the expression "put a kid on a horse" generally used in reference to?

12. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "putto," which one of the following items should you return with? A bed roll? A wooden stake? A variety of southwestern scorpion?

13. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "painter," which one of the following items should you go after? A man to paint the boss' house? A panther? A variety of prairie dog?

14. The expression "He packs a long rope" is generally used in reference to which of the following individuals? A sheriff? A rustler? A ranch owner?

15. True or false? The term "mulada" is used in reference to a herd of mules.

16. What is the meaning of the Spanish term, *"mozo"*?

17. What is the meaning of the word "locate" when it is used by a Westerner in connection with cattle?

18. What's a "little feller"?

19. If you were sent after the "head taster," which of the following individuals should you return with? The cook? The ranch manager? An Indian Chief?

20. What is the meaning of the term "to heel"?

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INHERIT THE NIGHT by Robert Christie
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The villagers had heard of San Cobar. The old legends said that it was a place of great wealth. But it lay beyond the mountains from which no man had returned alive. True, El Borracho, the drunken trader, had returned from his mysterious wanderings with rich ornaments, but he was now far gone in drink.

The stranger showed El Borracho more gold than he had ever seen, enough to make him forget the terrible mountain gales, the yawning crevasses.

What happened beyond the mountains is an unforgettable story—the story of an arch criminal alone among a strange people who did not know the meaning of suspicion, of fear, of hatred, of death, but who were to learn.

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STAMPEDE ON

Action-Packed Frontier Novelette

By GIFF CHESHIRE

They met in the rapids of Roaring River, Saul Ravel, who claimed the river as his private range, and Chris Truxton, who drove a packet as hard as a wild bronc—if he could win his race to get feed to starving Skull Basin!

CHAPTER ONE

River Fight

CHRIS TRUXTON was uneasy. It was the year of the big kill in Skull Basin. From the Catclaw to the Pulves the herds were going under the axe for tankage, or wasting on the hoof. Hard-bitten cowmen and brittle-nerved riders were at wit's end, and each other's dry throats. Vultures swung high over the basin; coyotes cut here and there in gorged zeal. The cousins of both, in human form, were also active. Chris stared down toward the river, wondering if he smelled one of the latter kind.

He sat his saddle at an intersection of a street strewn with straw. The litter marked a heavy trail from the river landing to the livery barn. Wheel cuts showed that several trips had been made with a heavy wagon. The ground seemed to sink under his horse as Chris made a hasty descent to the landing.

Loaded to the guards with baled hay, the *Chief* pulled hard on her lines. The *Chief* was the sternwheel river packet that was the basin's only freight connection with the outside world. Chris quit his horse in a sliding dismount and strode up the gang-plank. Saul Ravel was watching, waiting, his thick legs spread, arms folded across a slabby chest. A dirty boat cap was shoved to the back of his bristly head. The hot sun brought up the brown of his complexion.

"Howdy, Truxton," Ravel said, as Chris came onto the foredeck. "Hot day."

"Who's hauling my hay?" Chris demanded. "Why's it going into the livery barn?"

"Your hay?" Ravel asked. "This here's my hay. And I'll put it where I want."

Anger knocked the shock out of Chris, anger ready to boil since he had felt this thing in his bones.

"What're you trying to pull, Ravel?"

The river captain stroked a blunt, stubbled chin. He was still easy, amused. "Don't know what you mean."

"You can recall that I've got feed pens

Chris took a hard punch in the belly, and surged forward as somebody piled on his back. . . .

south of town, can't you? With a couple hundred steers in them that're out of hay, belonging to me and some friends of mine that're trying to stay out of bankruptcy. I've had hay ordered a month. You've been telling me it ain't got in down below yet. Now do you know what I mean?"

Ravel grinned. "Oh, that. But this here's my hay. Yours still ain't got in."

Chris took a step forward. "Out with it. What's your game?"

Ravel took out his jackknife, opened a blade and began to clean his fingernails. There was a gleam in his eyes that told Chris the man wouldn't hesitate to feel for his ribs with it, if necessary. "No game. I could let you have hay till yours gets here."

"So that's it. How much?"

"Oh, say around fifty dollars a ton."

Chris stood still for a moment, fighting down a red-hot urge to tie into the man. He was in a corner and had to use his head. Slowly he said, "You know I don't have that kind of money."

Ravel finished one hand, started on the other. "Well, mebbe I could take over your shebang down there. Pens and steers both."

"At what fancy price?"

"Oh, I'd say about a dollar a head. Their hides're all that's worth buying right now. And leather ain't going to bring much, all the tankin' that's been going on in the basin. Then mebbe another fifty bucks for the pens and barn. Don't want your hired man, though. That old warthog threatened to gun me a while back. Happened to spit too close to where he was standing." The river man snapped the knife shut, tossed it in the air and caught it. Then he stared at Chris Truxton in innocent amiability.

CHRIS had a bad moment. A couple of rough looking deckhands had come up quietly, ready to back Ravel in case of trouble, which was why the man had put away the knife. At the crest of the slant leading up into the town, a team and wagon appeared, coming down for more hay.

"By gum, I ordered hay," Chris rasped. "I'd bet you done away with the bill of lading. One that'd show this was consigned to me. You've built yourself a tail-hold on this country, Ravel. You've had Roaring River all to yourself. You even handle what mail comes in here. That's likely why I never got any word on my hay order."

"Hay's scarce," Truxton replied. Chris noted he didn't bother to deny anything. "Dealers down below been having a hard time getting it in on the railroad. This here's hay I ordered before you did your'n, I reckon. Probably you'll hear on your'n pretty soon. And find somebody to haul it. Hay's hard to handle and a fire hazard. This is the last I aim to haul this summer."

"By damn, I'm going down and look into it!"

"How? You want to ride all that way through the mountains? Going to be choosy about the passengers I haul, too, Truxton. Man can't be too careful. You never know what might happen."

"You sure don't!" Chris exploded. He swung and went down the gangplank. It was the baldest, boldest act of piracy he had ever seen. He had mailed his hay order, and it might not have gone down. Ravel wouldn't hesitate to go into a locked mail sack if he saw profit in it. It might not have got that far, for his wife's brother was postmaster.

Chris put his horse to a run when he left Long Bend, heading down a long coulee, which was veined by a creek but bare except for a few alanthus and locusts. The late sun splintered in a bloody crash against the rim rock. Unstirred heat danced up and about him. Chris Truxton made a high, bent figure as he rode, tall and lean but with shoulders that removed any hint of scrawniness.

His feed pens rose before him, on the shady side of a grove, crowded against the rim. There was a pole barn with a dirt-covered roof. Within the rough rambling inclosure, which overlay the creek, over two hundred droopy steers showed their ribs. The makeshift camp was beside the creek, above the corrals.

It was a venture of desperation into which Chris and three neighbors had sunk everything within reach. An effort to bring a few of the hardiest cattle to water and feed and ultimate shipment to market. And if things went well, maybe even to snake more out of the baking, blizzard-killed, drought-scorched basin that ran far to the south.

Pike Newgard hobbled out of the shade of the barn as Chris wheeled up. One of the partners, he read the look on Chris's face, let his jaw drop and began to fiddle uneasily with his watch chain.

"So the *Chief* come in again without any hay," he said.

"The *Chief* come in with hay, all right. Fifty dollar hay, going into the livery in town." In biting, bitter words, Chris told the old man about it.

Pike Newgard was a mild-looking oldster, but nobody along the bone-dry Tatlow let that fool him. Pike opened his mouth like a fish gasping in the hot air. "I've seen some awful dirty tricks in my day. But I never seen no tricks as dirty as this. Chris, we got to get hay."

"We'll grow it, if we do!" Chris said. "We've cleaned out what the livery had on hand. And fed the last three days ago."

"Must be more in Mill City."

"Maybe," Chris said. "With a hundred miles of mountain road no better than a pack trail between."

"The river's free. Go down and buy hay. Charter us a steamboat. Bust that buzzard's blockade afore I go down and shoot the seat off of him."

"Charter a steamboat with what? It was.

going to take all we could scrape together to pay for the hay."

"I'll go. And I'll get hay up here if I have to hire a rowboat and paddle it myself."

CHRIS had to grin, knowing Pike would do just that if necessary. Their little greasy-sack spreads adjoined each other, and they were old friends, joined in a venture of desperate little cowmen long toughened in the art of hanging on.

"And I'd help you," Chris said. "But you're forgetting one little thing. Ravel's showed his hand. You think he'd haul out our beef, even if we manage to put any under them wrinkled hides?"

Pike blew out his lips, let the breath explode. He brought his palms upward in a discouraged gesture. "That's his caper, all right. He's got us—coming, going or standing still. We can't go gunning for that hay. We can't drive for it, on account of there wouldn't even be shadders left was we to drive these steers across the mountains. Get the axe boy. We might as well set to work. After which I'm going to hunt me up a steamboat captain."

Chris shook his head. "Not yet. But we can't keep them critters suffering more'n two three days more. Even that's too long for a man with a heart in his chest. Pike, what about that wheezing little mail boat that runs up to Higbee Landing?"

"That wash tub? That ain't steamboat enough for Ravel to take the trouble to sink."

"He does some relay business with it. And he don't want the upper river or he sure would have. If it can jump the rapids from here to Higbee, that little snorter could haul hay. And it's better water below."

"It likewise would want pay. Big pay, considering it would mean twisting the big nose of Saul Ravel. Maybe the cost of a brand new steamboat, in case it got sunk. Can you finance that?"

"It's worth dickering," Chris said. "You stay here listening to them critters grumble. I'm going to look into it."

He took his time going back into town. The little *Water Skipper* made the mail and light freight run to the head of navigation each day and wouldn't be back before evening. Yet it was getting along toward that time of day when Chris again rode down the main street of Long Bend. As he came onto the thoroughfare from the country trail, he saw another load of hay turn in through the wide maw of the livery. The sight lifted his shoulders into rough impatience. He forced back his temper, realizing that if he and his friends were to survive, it would take more than hot heads.

While he waited for the *Skipper* to get in, Chris made some casual inquiries. Its owner was one Lew Quade who, with a sister, comprised the crew. The upriver haul was starvation business, which was why Saul Ravel had no interest in it. The *Skipper* probably couldn't handle a quarter the tonnage of the *Chief,* even if it held together negotiating Roaring River's long gorge between here and Mill City.

Chris understood this sour description when he went down to the landing at sundown. He had observed the *Skipper* before, but without interest. Tied up behind the *Chief,* she reminded Chris of a calf following a cow. A little sternwheeler, her weathered superstructure sagged from all corners. The guards were chewed, with some missing, with even the mooring lines frayed and aging.

He saw a girl fishing from the afterdeck. She wore levis that were rolled above the calves of pretty bronzed legs, and a thin shirt that fluttered in the light river breeze. Chris came abreast on the landing, pulled off his hat and said, "I take it you're Miss Quade."

The girl nodded. She had the guarded aloofness pretty girls find useful in a combined river and cow town. "I'm Miriam Quade. Did you want something?"

Chris grinned. "Sure do. The use of a steamboat for a few days."

Miriam looked back at her fishpole. "Wrong address. The *Chief's* next door."

"I mean the *Skipper,*" Chris said. "Could I talk to your brother?"

"If you've got the nerve to wake him up. Which is more than I've got. It was a hard run to Higbee, today. Lew swears we've made it for the last time. Wish I could believe the cuss, but he's said that before. And along comes a postcard and we're off for Higbee again. That's why I'm fishing carp. I do get hungry."

There were two cabins on the boat, squatted behind the wheelhouse. Chris followed as Miriam Quade went up the ladder in her

bare feet. He turned nautical enough to like the cut of her jib. She paused before one of the cabin doors, "Stand clear. He might come out shooting." Then she called, "Hey, Lew! I caught a carp. But you've got to scare the spiders out of the frying pan."

There was a sleepy explosion within. In a moment the door flung open. A figure stood framed that was taller and leaner than Chris Truxton, a man about the same age, with tousled hair and eyes reddened by river glare.

"This cowpoke says he's got a charter for us, Lew," Miriam said, and she shook her head. "The way they pester us with business when you're trying to catch some sleep."

Lew stared at Chris. "You don't want to charter us. Nobody wants to. Nobody wants to ship any freight by us, either. It just ain't done."

Chris glanced toward the hulking shape of the *River Chief*. "Big steamboats have big ears," he said. "Ask me in, and we'll uncork."

Miriam followed Chris into the cabin and shut the door carefully, interested but skeptical. Chris stated his business briefly, concluding, "Me and my partner'll furnish an armed guard for the undertaking. We can't offer you a cent beyond regular freight rates, but it'll pay off plenty in other ways if you thumb your nose at Saul Ravel's freight monopoly."

"It'll pay off," Lew conceded. "In a steamboat setting on the river bottom somewhere. Or going up in smoke. Seen half a dozen outfits try to horn in on Ravel's reach. That's what always happens. I guess it always will."

"When it gets around what he's done with the hay," Chris retorted, "this country'll raise on its hind legs about that cuss. Cowmen can fight like bobcats among themselves, but let somebody take advantage of bad range conditions, like we got now, and they'll stick together like burrs."

Lew yawned. "Ain't raising cows. I'm trying to figure how a man gets out of the steamboat business."

Miriam smiled at him. "Bucking Ravel's one way. Why don't we?"

"Help me spoil Ravel's game in this feed deal," Chris said, "and I guarantee you'd get all the feed and cattle business you could handle. Which ain't much with this packet, but it might be a start toward a bigger one. The cow country would swing behind you."

Lew rubbed his chin. "I hate Saul Ravel. I hate being a steamboat man with nothing but rocky rapids to steamboat in. I hate being hungry and watching my kid sister keep tightening her belt. When you want to start after that hay?"

"Right now."

"We're going to eat that carp, first. Go get that partner of yours. Be sure you got plenty of ammunition. Take me a couple of hours to build steam. Be here. Can't wait for any man. I'm in the feed and cattle hauling business. It keeps a man jumping."

CHRIS returned to his horse, mounted and rode up into the town. Evening was rolling in, oil lamps coming alight along the street. He was excited, resolved and cool, now that he had a course of action.

He was riding past the livery when a voice called, "Hey you, Truxton!"

It was Saul Ravel, who stood in the livery door, a deckhand from the *Chief* standing beside him. Chris swung his horse and rode over.

Ravel moved a thumb toward his hired hand. "He come up to tell me you went aboard the *Skipper*. Could of been that pretty girl, or it could of been something more foolish. Like thinking mebbe that leaky little wash boiler could haul hay for you, even could you locate any in Mill City. Them both would be long risks, Truxton. I wouldn't take 'em."

"Never seen risks come single," Chris retorted. "If I should decide on the proposition you mention, Ravel, I'd try to make it work. It'd likewise be foolish for anybody to meddle."

The riverman put a blunt finger under his ear and scratched a second. He spoke to the deckhand. "Go back and tell Quade I don't want to see steam coming out of his 'scape pipes. That we'll be over and pour 'em full of babbit if I do." He swung around and disappeared into the livery's obscure interior.

Chris rode up a block, turned a corner and slowed. Lew Quade couldn't be left without reinforcement, though Chris wanted Pike Newgard's hot head and cool trigger finger in the deal. He rode along a back street until he saw a boy loitering in a yard. Chris called him over and fished a dollar from his pocket.

"You know the new feed pens up the

coulee? This is yours if you'll flog my cayuse out there and tell my partner to get in here fast. Tell him to come aboard the *Skipper*. And tell him them steers'll starve just as quick without him holding their heads. Can do?"

"Can do," the boy said, and nearly swung up before Chris had dismounted.

Deciding it might be well to advertise his lingering presence, Chris returned to the *Skipper* by way of the livery barn. Only the hostler was there, canted back in a chair under a smoky-globed lantern that swung on rawhide. The fellow tightened apprehensively as Chris strode past. At the landing, Chris flung a glance toward the *Chief's* towering superstructure and caught a glimpse of Ravel and another at the rail, positioned where they could keep an eye on the *Skipper*, whose stack already was emitting a few smoky sparks against the now darkened sky. Ravel pulled up straight when he recognized Chris, but said nothing.

A soft, rich-timbered voice from the *Skipper's* obscure deck called, "Stand where you are, mister. Oh, it's you, Chris Truxton. Come aboard. We had word from Ravel we weren't to build any fire on this steamboat tonight. I guess not even to cook my carp."

"Seen sparks," Chris said, as he ascended the gang plank.

"That's Lew, down in the engine room. He went ahead and built a fire anyhow. But he says we don't eat until we get going. He's a big operator on this river now. Rushed." Miriam had a gun in her hand, Chris noticed as he came up, well prepared to repel boarders. Which accounted for Ravel's having been relatively dormant in spite of Lew's defiance.

"How long before we can paddle?"

"Another hour, anyhow. Where's your partner? Looks like we might need him. Ravel also sent word that if we did get down the river, we'd better stay there. Or run our steamboat on the trail across the mountains hereafter."

Saul Ravel decided against direct attack upon the bristling front confronting him. Chris took station on the main deck where he could watch the dockside. Miriam kept an eye toward the river against the chance of a swimmer's trying to sneak aboard. After a long while, Lew appeared on deck to announce that steam was up. She was oiled from stem to stern.

Pike Newgard still hadn't showed up, a delay that worried Chris. Maybe the boy hadn't found his way out to the feed pens or had loitered. Knowing Pike, Chris had figured the oldster would pound in loaded for bear. Chris wanted him along, but Lew was impatient to get started. Ravel probably had guessed they were waiting for something, and likely for reinforcements.

"Surprising Ravel ain't thought up nothing," Lew said. "He furnished the paper for that book they keep the dirty tricks in. Mebbe he was just trying to scare us. Or mebbe he figures the gorge a more suitin' place for mayhem. Didn't know I knew that word, did you, Truxton? Got arrested for it once. Bit a man's ear off. His fault, though. He had his teeth in my shoulder."

"Liar," Miriam said. "Here comes a horsebacker."

A rider smoked over the crest of the slanting road from the town, lighted a moment against the dim glow. The horse wheeled up on the landing, a rider flung down. Some figures appeared from the dark end of the wharfhouse and rushed toward the rider. Chris went pounding down the gangplank.

They had already piled onto Pike, whose erupted cursing Chris recognized. Chris waded in, knowing they were hands from the *Chief*. He made out the blocky figure of Saul Ravel, and felt a thrill as he picked his piece of the battlefront.

Ravel made identification and ripped out, "Boys, we got both of 'em!"

All the repressions of weeks boiled out of Chris. He drove straight against Ravel's rush. A fist lifted, shot forward and he felt a satisfying impact that sent a jar into his shoulder. He heard a wild, Siwash cry from the *Skipper*, and knew Lew had grown aware of the proceedings.

Ravel took Chris' counterdrive, batting back with heavy blows. Most of the available crew from the *Chief* seemed to be on hand, hardbitten rivermen earning their pay, assured by a superiority of two to one. Chris took a hard punch in his belly, and surged forward as somebody piled on his back. He stumbled, landing on his knees, caught in a strong clutch from behind. Saul Ravel bounced ahead, delivering a stiff kick into Chris' unprotected ribs.

The brutality brought fresh wrath out of Chris. He shoved up, lifting the weight. He heard a crunching *thunk* and his rearward assailant slacked, let go. The man fell, heavy and flat, and Chris swung to see the high, thin figure of Lew Quade. Lew already was making long strides toward a knot of three battling figures, of which Pike Newgard was the center. Lew's arm rose casually, fell, and another man went down to stay. A thrill shot through Chris as he wheeled to meet a sneak-in from a suddenly uncertain Ravel.

Chris bored into him, once more hearing that *thunk* from Lew's direction. He drove Ravel across the splintered planking, absorbing the man's brawling punches. He landed a jolting blow in the riverman's belly, feinted for the region again, but put the other fist to the chin. Without lifting his boots, Ravel bent backward, seeming to jump, then he collapsed.

Old Pike Newgard was standing in the clear, not far from Lew, and there were four prostrate figures on the wharf.

"You're right handy with that pile driver, Lew," Chris panted.

"Ain't I though? Little item I picked off the pin rail." Lew tossed the belaying pin fondly, catching it again. "Get aboard, boys. Fun's fun, but we're in the steamboat business. The *Chief's* got steam. Once them jiggers come to, they're apt to take after us."

CHAPTER TWO

Night Raid

THE *Skipper* cast off and stood down the river, slipping quietly into the night. Chris and Pike looked each other over, neither discovering serious damage.

"You sure took your time about showing up," Chris said.

"Had to shave and take a bath in the creek," Pike snorted. "The kid said there was a lady aboard this here steamboat. On top of that, you don't go off and leave two hundred steers in a pen without tending to some chores. Especially when you might never get back."

They stood in the pilothouse, with Lew at the wheel. The tall Quade had been ruminating. "There's four jobs on this packet," he said finally. "Two of us have been handling 'em. But if we're going to expand the business, we're going to need more help. Chris, you go down and fire for Miriam, and don't try to hold her hand. She needs both of 'em. Pike, you can stay with me and do what deck work I need done."

"Ain't had no supper," Pike said.

"Neither have we. There's carp in the galley. Go cook it. Rummage around a little and you might find some spuds and coffee. Both you boys grease your shootin' fingers."

"Ravel ain't due to come down this morning," Chris said. "Think he'll chase us tonight?"

"Hard to tell. But one thing's certain. Somewhere on this river he's going to connect. You better be handy when he does."

It relieved no one's apprehension when they reached Mill City in the early dawn without interference. Chris spent a busy morning searching for the hay he needed. "Blazes," the first dealer told him, "I never got no order from you. Saul Ravel placed a big one about that time. Hay's been hard to get. Let you have a couple of tons, maybe."

So it went, but by noon Chris figured he had arranged for quick dock delivery of as much as the *Skipper* could undertake. It would be a starter, and maybe they could make more trips. He went back aboard to wait, and, at one o'clock, the first wagon showed up. By five they were ready to stand up the river.

Lew was worried. "The *Chief* should of got in by now. Which she ain't unless I've gone blind. Ravel's laid a trap."

"Then let's go smell his bait," Pike said.

"Ain't that easy. Loaded this way, we don't have any choice but to plug ahead and try to keep 'em off."

"Then let's do it," Pike snapped. "And let's get this hay to them steers."

Lew gave him a solemn stare. "Likewise it's going to be dark pretty soon—when it's hard to tell what's going to happen till it's all over. But like you say, I guess we better get at it." Lew sighed.

The remaining light of evening took them past the flats and into the mountain gorge. Lew kept the wheel, with Pike acting as lookout. Down in the boiler room Chris fired, under Miriam's supervision, and

pondered the mysterious things she did to the machinery. A speaking tube connected them with the wheelhouse, and once in a while Lew's voice would report, "Still right side up and working at it, in case you're wondering."

Chris sweated in profusion, blisters raising on the hands he kept burning. Darkness began to flow past the engine room doors, the distant walls of the gorge bending back the packet's chuffing with a sharpened echo. Lew had mentioned a number of backwashes through here, places where even the big *Chief* could hide. Chris would have felt more comfortable on the back of a plunging bronco.

He was actually relieved when Lew's voice came down the speaking tube. "Chris, step aft and take a look. Pike thinks somebody's chasing us. Me, I can't see from here."

"Aft's that way," Miriam said, pointing. She swallowed.

Chris stepped carefully along the side-deck, close above the streaming current. He had gone only a few steps when he detected a tiny glow below, like a pair of fireflies. Running lights. But there was no sound of an engine detectable above the straining racket of the *Skipper*.

He went back to the tube and reported. "Pike was never righter."

"Well, nobody but Ravel and us ever uses this here reach. You better get your party set. The *Chief's* got twice our speed. Light, she can outhandle us. I'll just keep plugging, and the rest's up to you cowpokes."

"What'll they try?"

"Any one of a dozen things. Object being to put us out of business. We can best combat that by making 'em keep away from us. That's where you come in." Lew's voice made another sighing sound. "Mebbe I shouldn't of hit them boys so hard with that belaying pin. They're going to be mad."

Chris found Pike aft on the hurricane deck, staring backward over the *Skipper's* threshing paddlewheel. Pike had his gun out, his legs spread and his sharp chin thrust forward.

"Me," he announced, "when I go after hay for hungry steers, I fetch it or learn why not. And I don't mind killin' off any lowbellied, buzz-tailed sidewinders that's stinkin' enough to start interferin'."

The *Chief* was coming up fast. Chris could make out the muggy shape of her superstructure between her running lights. He checked his six-gun and fingered the extra ammunition looped in his belt.

To his surprise, the *Chief* veered to port as she overhauled them, stacks and 'scape pipes belching to lend the impression of a dragon bearing down on the little *Skipper*. Chris couldn't understand the canting over. It looked as if she meant to pass, though Lew Quade wasn't budging any to permit it. She came abreast, fifty yards over. Overhead, in startling abruptness, a pistol cracked.

"Son of a gun," Pike muttered. "Thought we was the gun crew on this battleship."

"Lew's peashooter. Warning 'em."

"She was just passin'. Peaceful like."

"The devil she was. Look! She's cutting in."

Chris raced forward. Positioned by the jackstaff, he saw the big *Chief* quartering sharply across the *Skipper's* course. Even a landlubber could see she was trying to scare her victim into shoal water to avert a collision. But Lew kept course, and at the last moment the *Chief* pulled away again.

Lew stuck his head out the pilothouse window. "She'd of cut closer if I hadn't warned 'em. Only fired across her deck. If she snorts up again, cut loose at her pilothouse. That's where Saul Ravel does his steamboatin'."

Sixty yards over, the *Chief* held abreast. The channel was straight and wide for a long stretch, handpicked by Ravel for his lethal maneuvers. Chris' throat was dry. Probably Ravel meant to edge in and board. If so, there would be shooting on both sides. He went to the near rail, set for it. Pike was still aft. Lew held to his pounding course, and below decks Miriam handled fire and machinery by herself. A woman who'd be worth her salt on a cow spread, Chris thought. . . .

A RIFLE cracked, its flash winking midships of the darkened *Chief*. Chris snapped a shot, hearing glass shatter in the *Skipper's* pilothouse. The gap had narrowed. The *Chief* was edging in. Chris swung behind a capstan, jaw clenched. Remembering two hundred head of hungry steers de-

nied hay by a river hog, by a man willing to fatten on the miseries of others and of dumb critters. He heard Pike's gun bark twice.

The gap of black water grew narrower. Again the rifle cracked, over there, and the little *Skipper* lost more pilothouse glass. Expecting it, Chris fired at its flash. He thought he heard glass break over there. Moving steadily abreast of the *Skipper*, the *Chief* kept crowding in. Chris lined on her pilothouse and emptied his gun.

He reloaded hastily. To his surprise, the *Chief* veered off. He might have nicked Ravel, who would be at her wheel, or scared him into reconsidering. The big packet slacked off, letting the *Skipper* pull slowly ahead.

"Don't let your breath out yet," Lew yelled. "He's only working farther into the book. Better get aft with Pike. Got a notion they'll make a pass at our paddles."

Passing the engine room door, Chris looked in and saw Miriam at her work. She was unruffled, as far as he could see, and she had a grease smudge on her cheek. His anger slacked enough that he felt very fond of her for a second. A river packet was no place for her. Just as hard on a cowspread, maybe, but not usually so much shooting. If a man could persuade her to leave a hot engine for the comforts of a hot stove—

"Comin' up again," Pike said, just ahead of him.

The *Chief* was due aft now, and again her stack belched fire into the night. There was no doubt she was coming up fast, holding due astern. Chris placed a shot between her running lights, Pike following suit. Below, the rifle took up the challenge. Chris heard a slug rip into the flimsy bulkhead behind him. Ravel had guts. His own superstructure was built of the same light material. The *Chief* kept coming in.

"They've rigged boiler plate or something to protect the pilothouse," Chris muttered. "In which case we won't stop 'em." He fired again, now able to make out the pilothouse. His careful shot made no difference.

He rose and plunged to a near ladder, ascended and sprinted to the *Skipper's* sagging little wheelhouse. Lew couldn't see much of what was happening due aft.

"They've rigged protection for the pilot," Chris reported. "They'll smash our paddlewheel sure as shooting."

"If Ravel's got the nerve," Lew said. He bent toward the funneled opening of the speaking tube. "Hey, Sis! Slack her off, count ten and give her full astern! Then get the devil away from that engine! Tell Pike to get clear of the paddles!"

The *Skipper's* pounding vibration ceased instantly. Chris could feel her lose weigh in the running current. He was racing aft on the upper deck when her paddles reversed, apparently with a wide open throttle. The motion threw him flat on his haunches. He scrambled up, reaching the rear rail in time to see the *Chief*, some fifty yards astern, heel so hard that her wash lifted and rocked the *Skipper*.

Chris' admiration for Lew shot up a mile. Ravel's opening maneuver had been to make a dead-on run at the *Skipper*. It had failed to budge Lew a degree off his course. But Ravel had lacked the nerve to see if Lew would actually drive his little packet into a smashing, dead-on collision.

The *Chief* had heeled so hard it seemed the momentum would carry her into a belly-tilted crash, anyhow. Lew apparently gave more orders, for the *Skipper's* paddles ceased their wild reverse. They caught the forward thrust again. The packet veered, took hold. The *Chief*, twenty yards off her port, wheeled onto a forward tack. Again the rifle opened fire, over there. Chris dropped flat and made answer, again emptying his gun. He could hear lead chunking into bulkheads behind him. Once a slug whined off metal and howled on into the night. The *Chief* slacked, held abreast, keeping up the rifle fire. Glass shattered steadily in the furor. The little *Skipper* pounded on.

In spite of the deadly contest, Chris began to feel hope. Three times Saul Ravel had discovered he had taken on a man-sized job. If the *Skipper* could keep pounding, she might make it to Long Bend, even if it meant a running fight all the way. Ravel would have to do some tall explaining to cover his conduct this night. He would have to face a hostile river town and cow country besides.

The packets kept peppering at each other. Chris wasn't sure when he grew aware of something new and alarming. The *Skipper* heeled in slowly toward the *Chief*, which at first seemed like a tactical maneuver.

Then she swung onto the other quarter. Suddenly Chris realized she was careening. Alarm broke through him. He shoved up and raced toward the wheelhouse.

Lew was stretched on the floor, a hand extended where he finally had let go of the wheel. Broken glass crunched under Chris' boots. The packet was whipping in the current, unsteered, helpless.

His throat hurting, Chris put his mouth to the speaking tube and blew, as he had seen Lew do. "Miriam! Lew's hit. What do we do?"

He heard a shocked cry. "Line her out!"

"How?"

"Try, Chris—try! I can't leave the engine!"

He shoved his hip against the racing wheel, felt it heat as friction slowed it. He caught hold and nearly got an arm jerked off. But he held on. He had no idea what he was going to do. The *Skipper* was driving hard to starboard, Miriam pouring the steam to give him steering weigh. He picked up the feel of the slipstream on the rudder. He got the hang, clenched his jaw and threw her over. Something like the grinding of a grist mill shuddered up through the frame. Chris hit the wheel so hard he had time only to think, *shoaled!* before everything went black.

HE WASN'T clear out. He felt himself hit the deck and heard the framework groan under the strain. He shoved to his knees, wondering what had happened in the boiler room, with all the machinery and the red-hot fire. He thought of Pike. He pushed himself to a stand, shaking his head roughly, then staggered out to the rail.

The *Chief* had stooped shooting, and momentum had carried her on upstream, but she was swinging around. The *Skipper* was well off shore, but Chris knew her careening had carried her out of the channel onto a rock or gravel bar. Ravel knew this reach and his final tactic had been to force Lew into its pitfalls.

The *Skipper's* stack was down, smoke, fire and occasional tongues of flame shooting up into the night. Her boiler hadn't blown, but she was liable to burn where she lay. There was a small skiff aboard, if they had to use it. Still rocky, Chris found a ladder and made his way to the lower deck. Pike was already in the engine room, bent over Miriam, who lay motionless on the deck.

"Knocked out," Pike grunted. "Damn, she's a nice kid. Damned if she ain't. Damned if we'll let them throat-cuttin' pirates come aboard at this stage of the game."

"Stack's down," Chris replied. "Fire's licking around. She's apt to catch, and we can't fight fire and Ravel. Lew's hit, but Ravel had him crowded into dangerous water, anyhow." The shifting hay had crushed in the far bulkhead. He stared at it. "We better give up and get the Quades off, Pike. If that hay catches fire, she's apt to blow up."

Pike swallowed, nodded. "They been two game people, but I reckon we gotta."

The *Chief* called a warning and swung in until fenders touched. Chris and Pike had carried Miriam upstairs and Lew to the sidedeck, ready to be transferred. Chris was weak and sick from shock and regret. They were no closer to having hay for their steers than they had ever been. Their stubbornness had done this to the Quades and had cost them the sorry little packet that was their livelihood. The dose grew more bitter when he saw Ravel's grinning face.

Ravel had come out on deck, into the light thrown out by the *Skipper's* fractured stack. He had his thick legs spread, heavy fists planted on his hips. A deckhand nearby covered the *Skipper* with a rifle.

Ravel called, "You cowpokes pitch your hardware into the water."

"We got a couple of casualties, Ravel," Chris snapped. "One's a girl. You ought to be proud of yourself."

"They was warned and they asked for it. We'll bring 'em aboard. And make sure their lousy little tub burns to the water line. Pitch out your guns."

"How do you think you're going to square this?" Chris demanded, hating to comply.

"Square it? What've I got to square? All I know is we tried to pass and you fired on us. We had to put up a fight. Got a whole crew that seen it. It ain't my fault you run aground and burned."

Chris leaned limply against the rail, tasting the dregs of despair. What Ravel had stated were objective facts. Lew had fired a warning shot when the *Chief* had first tried to pass. You could suspect to hell

and back, but it would have no weight in court. The man was apt to get away with this. Rebellion hit Chris, hot and reckless. He glanced at Pike and saw the same feeling in the oldster's face. It was now, before they threw away their guns, or never.

CHAPTER THREE

Free Water

THE *Chief's* paddles still turned, holding her against the *Skipper*. Ravel's second in command was at the wheel. Engineer and fireman had come to the boiler room to witness the victory. Two deckhands stood ready to leap aboard the crippled packet, but were waiting for the cowmen to disarm. These, with Ravel, probably comprised the packet's crew.

Light flared up at that moment, spontaneous ignition, somewhere below decks, maybe, from the searing, broken stack. It might mean that in another ten minutes the stricken *Skipper* would be untenable. Every man on the *Chief* glanced involuntarily toward the deck.

Chris reached a desperate decision, in the same second apparently as Pike. Make a try, surrendering quickly if it failed and get the Quades off this incipient inferno. But try. He had holstered his gun. He whipped it up, yelling, "Drop that rifle, fellow, or you get a hole in your belly!" Pike fired a shot above the deckhand's head, splintering a board on the freight house bulkhead.

The fellow had nerve. He jerked up the rifle. His companions bolted back through the deckhouse door. Chris and Pike fired together, and Chris never knew whose slug knocked the rifle from the deckhand's grip. The fellow staggered backward, swung and plunged into the *Chief's* interior.

"We tried to rescue you!" Ravel bellowed, from beyond sight. "Now you can stay there and burn! Charlie, turn the wheel!" The *Chief's* big stern wheel began to kick up water.

Chris had vaulted to the *Skipper's* rail and he went on across, landing lightly on the *Chief's* deck. He raced for the pilot house, praying the man at the wheel had no gun, that it would take time for Ravel and the rest of the crew to scare up weapons. If he failed to cut it, Pike would have to load the unconscious Quades into the *Skipper's* dinky little skiff and take to the river if the packet took fire. But all three would prefer that to abject submission.

Chris' objective was the pilot, who likely had not seen him leap aboard. He scrambled to the hurricane deck and bounded for the little structure that was the wheelhouse. Ravel and the others were still belowdecks, probably unaware that they had been boarded, and unwilling to emerge until out of pistol range.

"Them cowpokes're spunky," the pilot said without turning his head, when Chris stepped in.

"In a pinch," Chris agreed. He moved across, touched his gun to the man's back and let him feel the pressure. "Fellow, you drop back down to the *Skipper*. We're going to take those people aboard. And as much hay as your crew can rassle off before she blows up."

The man started to swing about, but changed his mind when Chris increased pressure. He belled, worrying Chris as to what he had actually signaled until the *Chief's* big twin engines slacked off. But he bellowed into the speaking tube, "Hank, go tell Ravel one of them cowpokes done sneaked aboard!"

Chris let it go, since he needed this man alive and on the job. The pilot showed no inclination to defy him. A hasty glance rearward showed Chris that the *Skipper's* broken stack still belched flame and smoke. As yet, the packet had not kindled. If it did, Chris knew, it would burn like a haystack. The whole thing was heated to the point where at any moment it could burst into enveloping flames.

The pilot made a swing, coming in obediently from below the *Skipper*. Chris heard shouts and pounding feet below. The word had reached Ravel, or the changed movement had alarmed him. Chris fired a shot, high, at the head of the companionway, where someone had appeared. The figure dropped back.

"Tell Ravel!" Chris called, "that we're going to make a rescue or his pilot's going to pile him on the rocks."

There was no further objection. The *Chief* once more sidled in, until her fenders touched those of the doomed *Skipper*. Pike Newgard was waiting. At the moment

of contact he ripped out, "Ravel, put your deckhands down here to take the Quades off. Nothin' I'd like better than to build a tunnel through that gut of yours."

The pilot had to stay at the wheel to hold the *Chief* in place, and Chris couldn't risk leaving him. He waited to hear what Ravel would do.

"Go ahead, boys," Ravel's voice bellowed. "It's no more than we started out to do before they turned nasty. But make it quick. That tub's dangerous."

It was only a moment until Pike called, "Let 'er rip, Chris. This here deck's getting hotter'n a stove lid."

"Make 'em pull off the hay!" Chris answered.

"Blazes, Truxton!" Ravel's voice objected. "The *Skipper'll* burn like a celluloid collar in a minute."

"Your idea. Move hay." Pike's voice, though elated, was hard.

CHRIS held them there until they had taken the *Skipper's* precious deckload aboard. He knew all hands had turned to in a scurrying sweat, including Ravel and even Pike Newgard. The pilot, standing in front of Chris, was uneasy but obedient. Even Chris knew that abused steamboat boilers had a way of letting go without warning, creating a quick and final inferno.

They had barely pulled free when gases which had collected belowdecks took fire with a ballooning *swish*. They were still within sight when the boiler went, finally, with a flash and roar that rent the night, but by that time Chris had fresh troubles on his hands.

Ravel's voice came up from the engine-room. "Truxton! We got that goaty old partner of yours. He was so anxious to get his hay aboard he got careless. He's out cold. But your pretty girl friend has come to. A big goose-egg on her cute forehead, but that's all that's wrong with her. Yet. And I mean yet. You better throw away your gun and come down."

"Don't you do it, Chris!" Miriam's voice broke out, hollow and tinny in the tube. Then there was a sound as if she might have cried out. Chris felt his hackles rise. Somebody probably had twisted her arm.

"You hear that, Truxton?" Ravel called up. "She could get even louder."

Chris felt cold sweat drip onto his sides. If they'd knocked out Pike they had his gun. Ravel didn't mean to face charges, however likely his getting off, if he could bring matters to a more satisfactory conclusion.

Chris called, "Ravel, send her up here within five minutes or you've got a steamboat of your own on the rocks."

There was silence. The pilot kept mumbling, probably cursing, but he was a man short on fight. The *Chief* was in midstream now, pounding steadily toward Long Bend, yet the obscured shores were sufficiently shoaled and rock-studded that a packet could be wrecked at any point if driven in head on.

Ravel seemed to lack faith in his pilot. In a couple of minutes, Miriam called from the companionway, "Me, Chris!" then appeared on the hurricane deck. It eased the strain a moment to see her alive and on her feet. To hear her voice. She ran across the deck and came into the wheelhouse.

"Thank the Lord!" Chris breathed. "How's Lew?"

"Had his scalp parted, but he's still alive. Somebody knocked Pike cold, and they've got him tied up. Ravel won't bother 'em. You took the torture notion out of his head. He won't try anything more knowing you can wreck his life's work in less than five minutes."

"They've got Pike's gun?"

"Yes. But it's the only one. They were cussing because the rifle's out of commission."

"If they could drop me from one of them dark niches back there, the pilot wouldn't have to bother wrecking any steamboat."

"You said it, bucko," the pilot announced. "Your turn to sweat. Nothing to stop a man's sneaking over the fantail and sending a slug through your back. You cowpokes been right rough tonight. We ain't done nothing but defend ourselves. Right now you're highjackin' a steamboat."

"I know how to run a steamboat," Miriam said, "if you want to shut his big mouth." But her voice was tight.

"A good notion," Chris said. "Take over while me and this man go below."

A moment later he followed the pilot across the hurricane deck, moving close behind, gun still jammed in the fellow's back. Chris wanted this protection to get within

arguing range of Ravel and was baldly using the man for a shield. On the lower deck they turned aft until they came to the big door of the freight room. Chris knew he had to act fast, before they discovered Miriam was at the wheel and unprotected. If put to it, the girl wouldn't hesitate to run the *Chief* aground, but Chris didn't want her to have to do it.

Chris had more on his mind than the relatively easy matter of getting to Long Bend without further trouble from Ravel. The *Skipper* had been destroyed, putting the Quades out of business even if Lew pulled through. It would not be beyond Ravel to claim the hay he had taken off the *Skipper* as salvage. Whatever, there was no chance of getting more to Long Bend, and he and Pike still had two hundred head of starving steers up there.

He came upon his men in the packet's hot engine room. The pilot tried to stamp his bootheels as they descended so as to warn his fellows. The heavy noise of the engines seemed to cover it. The man lacked the nerve to cry out, with Chris' gun still shoved against his back. At the bottom, Chris brought him to a halt with a short whisper.

Then Chris ripped out, "Ravel! You and your gunnies turn around. And shove up your hands."

They hadn't expected anything as bold as this. Ravel whirled, disclosing he had shoved Pike's six-gun under the waistband of his pants. The two deckhands were with him, and they had been in a huddle, probably putting together the story they would need to agree on when they reached Long Bend. Apart, engineer and fireman were devoting themselves to the machinery. But all obeyed in slack-jawed surprise.

"Just another black mark against you, Truxton!" Ravel exploded. "What good's this going to do you?"

"Gives a man the feeling he's trying," Chris answered. He shoved the pilot forward, moved in cautiously and extracted the gun from Ravel's belt. Holding both, he ordered the pilot over with the others. The engineer had cautiously reached for a wrench, with an eye to the smoky lamp fastened on the wall. A frown from Chris made him drop the idea. "Where's Pike Newgard?"

"Locked in a cabin with Quade. Don't play the fool, Truxton. You got yourself into enough hot water."

"You're scared I'll pile up your steamboat just to get even," Chris answered. "You scared enough to dicker?"

"You ain't in a dickerin' position, bucko."

"I can yell up the tube for Miriam to put your big steamboat on the rocks hard enough to wreck it."

Ravel looked at his engineer. "Pete, kill the engine."

"Say your prayers first, Pete," Chris warned.

Ravel looked uneasy. "Not that it'll get you anywhere, Truxton. But what do you want?"

"Delivery of what hay's aboard without any argument. Then what's stored in the Long Bend livery at regular price plus fair freight charges. Then the damage to the Quades made good, plus your promise to let Lew enter competition against you on the river, in case he can find another steamboat. That would be right healthy for all concerned."

"You're plain crazy."

Chris shrugged. "I see a gear locker over yonder. Ravel, take your pilot and two deckhands and crawl into it. I aim to lock you in and ride herd on your engineer and fireman. Step lively."

None dared defy him. Ravel swallowed, and the others wagged their jaws, but they obeyed. Chris closed the door after them, shoved a peg between hasp and staple, then turned to keep an eye on the engine room crew. The *Chief* kept up its steady labor toward Long Bend. . . .

IT WAS mid-morning when Miriam Quade stood the big *Chief* in to the Long Bend landing, as easily as if it had been the much smaller *Skipper*. Chris hadn't dared take his eye off the engine room crew until that moment. Now, their services no longer required, he made them tie the packet up. Thereafter he released the prisoners, forcing the whole bristling crew to ascend to the second deck and enter a cabin, where he again placed them under lock and key.

Pike was revived and fuming. Chris released him, discovering also that Lew was conscious, though weakened and in a serious condition.

"What we going to do now, Chris?" was

Pike Newgard's first question for Chris.

"Get Lew to the doctor, then get our hay off and out to the corrals, then turn Ravel and his cutthroats loose. Reckon it's their say what we'll be up to after that."

It took some of the tired temper out of Pike. "Well, we set out to get hay. We got it."

"You and Miriam keep an eye on things. I'll take care of Lew and see if we can scare up some wagons."

He got a rig from the livery, took Lew to the doctor's office, and waited long enough to get a cheering opinion. Then he found a teamster, who knew another, and made arrangements for them to start moving hay immediately. He had the feeling of sitting on a powder keg with a lighted cigar in his hand, but he aimed to feed the steers that had gone too long without anything but creek water. Considering the circumstances, any cowman worthy of the name would do that, no matter what the cost.

When the last load of hay was on its way up the coulee, Chris turned Ravel and his cohorts loose. By now Lew had been moved to the doctor's house, and Miriam had gone along. Chris and Pike kept guns on the *Chief's* fuming crew until they were well up the dock.

"You won't get away with it!" Ravel called after them. "I'll have that hay back. I'll run you two to the pen. I'll have them scraggly steers of yours for damages. And I'm still going to sell hay to the cow country at my own price."

It was something to see contentment in the feeding pens. Chris and Pike satisfied their own long-denied hunger, took turns in catching up some of their lost sleep. Then Chris cleaned up, saddled, and rode into Long Bend through a gathering twilight. Rested and fortified with food, he was in no mood to let Saul Ravel make the next move. Besides that he felt a heavy responsibility to the Quades, who had lost all and gained nothing in the enormous effort that had gone into the feeding of the starved steers.

The *Chief* was still tied at the landing, showing lights, which meant that Ravel was probably aboard and cooking trouble. Chris had little doubt the man could bring criminal charges and make them stick, with

a whole crew to back his claims. But he had mocked deeper law, the moral decency in nine-tenths of the population. It gratified Chris to see a number of cow ponies strung along the hitchracks on the main street. The operations of the past two days were far too big to hide. By now it would be common knowledge that Saul Ravel had set out to corner the feed market at a time when the cow country was fighting for its life, and that a couple of plain cowpokes had had the gall to buck him and had beaten him on the first round.

It would be around that Lew Quade had lost his little packet and been seriously wounded in the struggle. These were things that would warm hearts while also heating tempers already turned unstable by natural conditions. There was hay in town and more could be brought in with the right operator on the river.

These thoughts turned in Chris' mind. From them had sprung a hunger to play for the highest stakes, for the sake of his fellow cowmen as well as for the spunky Quades, now that Ravel had hurled another challenge.

He was happy to find three riders in town from his own end of the basin, in to get drunk and forget their troubles for a night but willing to forget that when they heard what he had to tell them.

"Probably Ravel could make his legal points stick," Chris warned them. "If he's got the guts to go ahead. Which he will unless he's shown he's messed himself so bad his quick profits'll ruin his regular business."

A wiry-haired whang-leather rider from the Malmo grimaced. "If we boycott Ravel, we'll have to train buzzards to fly our freight across the mountains."

"I've got a notion we could get other operators interested in this reach if we guaranteed protection long enough to bust Ravel, and it'd pay us to furnish it."

"Big undertaking."

"Sure," Chris agreed. "And I'm hoping we'll only have to use it for a threat. Let's the four of us go down there and try to buy the hay he's got stored in the livery."

THE suggestion was received with grim interest. A man on the darkened deck of the *Chief* challenged the quartet as it started up the gangplank. Chris answered gruffly, and there was no resistance. Disclosing the jumpy, watchful state of his nerves, Saul Ravel appeared at the railing above them.

"You boys can stop right there," he announced. There was a click, revealing through the darkness that he had secured a gun. "Hear that? And I've got the whole crew armed to the teeth."

"With the notion of taking my hay away from me?" Chris asked.

"With the notion of taking *my* hay back. What do you jiggers want?"

"The hay you're cornering in the livery. Twenty-five a ton where it lays, which is still a good price. Down in Mill City I found out what you paid."

Ravel laughed. "You're a funny cuss, Truxton. The ideas you get. You don't need to tell me what you'll do if I say go to hell. I'm saying it. Now go ahead and do it. Then I'm coming up to your corrals to get my hay back. Might even chouse off your scarecrow steers just to show I don't like you."

A puncher beside Chris stirred angrily. "Ravel, apparently it ain't sunk in that Chris has got friends in these parts. You've already done too much."

"I don't need cow country business. This town gives me what I want and leaves me free to turn a extra dollar now and then."

"It ain't Truxton talkin' now, Ravel. I'm speaking for my neighbors. Give us a option on your hay at a decent price. Agree to make good the damage you done Lew Quade, or we're backin' some Mill City operator to come in against you. With enough protection to make it stick. Give these Long Bend business houses a guarantee they'll keep getting freight, and see how far they'll string with you."

There was a moment's silence. Ravel stiffened. He lifted his free hand to his face, slid the palm along his jaw. In milder tones he said, "Come on aboard, boys. Mebbe we can figure somethin' out that'll suit all of us."

They filed into the dimly lighted main cabin. Ravel had slid his gun back under the band of his trousers. He wore an affable air. This perplexed Chris. Maybe the man hadn't foreseen the prospect of an entire country rising against him and establishing its own freight service with the teeth to give it bite. Something certainly

had turned him too agreeable of a sudden.

Ravel said, "Look, boys. Supposing I let you have your hay at that price. Supposing I even forget the dirt Truxton done me. Good cheap hay'd give you all the edge on the other folks up your way."

The puncher's face twisted in deep disgust. "You just can't see a man thinking of anything but his own interests, can you? We want all your hay, and we aim to pass it out equally to all that needs it. We want it enough to take it away from you if we have to."

Ravel shook his head, grinning confidently again. "No you won't. I got you where I want you now. I was hopin' I'd get that kind of threat. In the past twenty-four hours I been fired on without provocation. I tried to make a rescue and was made a prisoner on my own outfit with most my crew. Now more threats. I'm holding you jiggers aboard. I'm taking you downriver with me and turning you over to the federal marshal. Then we'll see how many other greasy-sackers will try to buck me."

He didn't try to draw his gun to cover them, knowing any puncher in the group could beat him to it. Chris knew the man was relying upon his crew. They might even have considered this development and made plans. Saul Ravel stood slackly, exuding confidence.

A puncher swore and turned, his hand reaching for his gun. Ravel yelled a warning that carried the length of the packet. The cabin door burst open. Chris saw figures outlined there, men with guns in their hands. A bleak resignation came to Chris. He had tried to avoid this, but Ravel wouldn't have it any other way. A gun blasted, spitting smoke and flame. Men swung out, seeking cover, getting set. Chris fired at a man in the door, saw him go down, another bolting across and getting in.

Ravel was swearing loudly, his gun out, ready to make it a finish fight. A slug smashed the lamp, casting the cabin into firestreaked blackness. A man yelped in pain, others darted for the deck, and the fight spread out. Chris grew aware that he was alone in a suddenly quiet cabin. He moved across the floor, nearly tripping over a soft, still figure. He made the deck.

In the pale outside light he recognized a man bolting for the gang plank and cut out after him. He didn't shoot, for he wanted this man alive, the one man in the *Chief's* crew that might be of service to them—the second officer who earlier had shown himself short of spunk and was now running out on the fight. People were shouting on the street above the landing as the noise of the shooting carried up.

Chris pursued his man on pounding legs. He yelled an order to halt. The mate swung then, started to line the gun he carried. Then he flung it from him as a dangerous thing and bleated in terror. He stood still while Chris came up to him.

Chris grew aware of quietness aboard the *Chief*. He had a dry throat, a rising revulsion against this action. But Saul Ravel had disclosed himself to be a man wholly unresponsive to reason, set on pushing his good thing to the bitter end. Chris herded the mate back aboard. As they came onto the deck, a light was struck in the cabin. Entering, Chris felt a surge of relief when he saw all three of his fellows still on their feet. Saul Ravel was stretched on the floor, a bullet hole above an eyebrow. A deckhand, likewise stilled, lay just outside.

"Rest of them hightailed it," a puncher said. "Probably huntin' that goat trail across the mountains that was so useful to Ravel so long. What you got there?"

Chris responded with a cold grin. "A man

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Underground Lullaby

A stranger on the trail in certain valleys in Idaho, who bedded himself down in the grass, might decide to move on when his ear picked up the steady, ominous rumble of underground thunder. Geologists explain it this way: practically all of central Idaho is laced with subterranean lakes and rivers whose size and number can only be imagined.

—J. W. Q.

NOBODY LOVES A LAWMAN

"Are you going," the sheriff demanded, "or are you going to hand in your star?"

By CLIFTON ADAMS

What good's a deputy, Sheriff Topatt wondered angrily, if he showed more talent for round-siding at the Cattlemen's Bar than rounding up badmen?

SHERIFF MARTIN TOPATT and his deputy, Ham Calvert, were killing time at the water trough in front of Mackelson's feed store when they heard the distant racket of the El Paso stage coming in. Both men, as of the same mind, closed their pocket knives, flipped away matchsticks on which they had been whittling and sauntered down the plankwalk toward the stage office. The town of Manville lay sleepy, quiet, simmering slowly under the steady heat of a Texas summer.

Between the two of them, the sheriff was thinking, they had Manville the way he liked it—quiet and peaceful. Carp Taliaferro, a sharpshooting gambler who had been robbing cowhands of their hard-earned pay, had been forced to seek the healthier climes of

Big Rock, a town twenty miles to the south. Two of the Whitfield boys, Thad and Kramer, were safely locked up in the Manville jail. The other brother, Bass Whitfield, probably had lit out for the brush country.

It was on days like this that Sheriff Topatt liked to play with the idea of running for office again come next election-time, although he knew that it was out of the question. For one thing. he was sixty-four years old, which was much too far along to deal with men like Taliaferro and the Whitfields. Anyway, he had gone to a great deal of trouble to train young Ham Calvert to take his place.

At exactly four twenty-two, only an hour and twelve minutes late, the aged Concord rounded into Manville's Main Street and jolted to a stop in front of the stage office. A good part of the male citizenry was on hand to gaze curiously at the passengers and to chin with Buff Struk, the driver. It was a matter of professional caution for the sheriff and Ham Calvert to meet each stage and see who they were going to have in town for the night.

"Hear anything along the line about Bass Whitfield, Buff?" someone asked, as the driver set his brake.

"Heard he was clean on the other side of the Nueces," Buff Struk grinned. "Here, some of you boys give me a hand."

Behind the seat, he began wrestling a big wardrobe trunk over the guardrail, and several men gathered around to ease it to the ground. Not until then did the sheriff notice the woman inside the coach.

Ham Calvert grunted softly and with feeling, as Buff Struk opened the coach door and handed her down to the ground. The woman —or girl, rather, for she couldn't have been more than twenty-two or three—smiled at the crowd. She was something to look at, all right, the sheriff had to admit. He was aware of a pretty face, an enormous black hat and several colored ostrich plumes. No more than fifteen and a half hands in height, he guessed, measuring from the top of her head to the ground.

A little too frail for the sheriff's taste, built more for show than a hard day's work. Too, he wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't just a mite of paint on her mouth.

"How about one of you gents showin' this lady to the Holster House?" Buff Struk said, grinning.

Most of the men stepped forward eagerly, then thought of their wives and froze in their tracks.

Not Ham Calvert. "I'd be proud, ma'am," he said, grinning idiotically, and picked up traveling cases and boxes. The sheriff grunted, frowned.

"How nice!" the girl beamed. She took Ham's arm possessively and the two of them marched together up the plankwalk. Some of the men laughed as Ham tried to shorten his lazy, ground-eating stride to match her clattering canter. Like harnessing a plow mule to a Morgan colt, the sheriff thought.

"Looks like she's got Ham hooked, Sheriff," one of the men joshed. "You better look around for a new deputy."

The sheriff spat. "Who is she?" he demanded of Buff Struk.

"Entertainer," the driver said. "Goin' to be the new singer at the Cattlemen's Bar."

The sheriff watched them turn in at the Holster House Hotel, told himself it was nothing to get het up about. It was just common decency, taking a female stranger to her hotel. He would have done the same thing himself—if it had been forced upon him.

Later, back at his water trough station, Sheriff Topatt watched Ham undertake the moving of the girl's wardrobe trunk. "Oh, no," he heard the girl laughing, "not there! Over here!" Ham, lugging the huge trunk on his back, reminded the sheriff of a trained bear he had once seen. It hurt him to see a youngster like Ham—a man who had brought in two of the notorious Whitfield boys all by himself—get bossed around by a slip of a girl.

But then, he was an old man, and perhaps there were certain aspects of youth that he no longer understood.

BY NIGHTFALL it was all over Manville that Burt Hotchkiss had imported a new girl singer for his Cattlemen's Bar. The saloon was well filled and noisy around eight o'clock, as the sheriff stepped into the doorway to look things over. He spotted his deputy at a table near the piano and went over.

"I had an idea," he said dryly, "that you was supposed to be on duty."

Ham Calvert looked up, his big face coloring. "There's nothing doing on the street. All the menfolks are in here. I don't guess the women and kids are going to be break-

ing laws or violating peace ordinances."

"They might," Sheriff Topatt muttered, "if they find out where their men are."

The Piano player broke into a lively tune and the crowd of men began shouting and clapping their hands as Laura La Main—that was her name—stood by the piano, smiling. Stonefaced, the sheriff pulled a chair out and sat down.

After the noise had quieted down Laura La Main began to sing, and, the sheriff, only half listening, thought that nobody ever came by such a name honestly. It was too pat, too pretty, just like her mouth was too red. Still, he had to admit that she could sing pretty well, and there was no doubt about it, she was something to look at. What annoyed him most was the way she kept smiling at his deputy.

When the singing was over the men whistled and stamped and shouted for more. The sheriff got up and tramped out.

Later, when he came back to the Cattlemen's, Ham Calvert was still sitting at the same table. The look in his eyes reminded the sheriff of a poled steer.

"Ham," he said, "I'm turning in. You keep watch on things."

The deputy looked at him, blinked. "Sure."

The sheriff made one last round of Main Street, went down to the jail to make sure the Whitfield boys weren't acting up, then went home and to bed. But sleep came slowly.

He began to think of the day when he could retire; nothing to do but sit around with the boys at Holliday's Barber Shop and talk and take life easy, knowing that the sheriff's job was in the hands of a good man. Lazily, he thought back over the years, remembering when Manville had been a trail town, and a tough one, at that. Sheriff Topatt had kept things under control then, as he had ever since. He liked to think that after he was gone the town would go on just like it was now. Peaceful, kind of lazy, with a good sheriff to put the kibosh on trouble before it had a chance to grow.

That was the reason he started training Ham Calvert when he wasn't much more than a shaver. Ham was a good boy. If he wasn't especially long on brains, he more than made up for it in nerve and common sense.

That is, he had had plenty of common sense a while back. How much difference a pretty-faced saloon singer was going to make, the sheriff wasn't sure.

He tried to see Ham in his mind the way a girl like Laura La Main would see him. It was a fact, he admitted, that Ham was not a bad looking boy. Big shoulders, clean-cut features, black curly hair. He could see how a girl might try to get her loop around him.

Well, the kid had to get hooked sometime. . . .

It was the next night that hell broke loose in Manville, although there was nothing much known about it until the day after. Somebody, around midnight, had come up to the Manville jail, pulled the bars out of the cell window, with the help of a lariat and a good strong horse. By the time Ham Calvert discovered the damage, the Whitfield boys were two hours gone.

"Damnation!" Sheriff Martin Topatt moaned when Ham and a pickup posse came back empty-handed. "Where were *you* when all this was going on?"

The young deputy's face colored. "Why, I guess I was in the Cattlemen's Bar." He shuffled and kicked the ground.

"At the Cattlemen's Bar," the sheriff repeated, his voice rasping. "Now that's just dandy. Maybe I've been wrong about you. Maybe you're not fit to be a sheriff."

Ham kicked the ground some more. "Maybe so," he mumbled.

The sheriff saw that he was off on the wrong track. He said quickly, "I didn't mean that, son, and I'm sorry I said it. But we got to get those Whitfields back—State officers are on their way to take them to Huntsville. . . . Probably it was Bass Whitfield that did the bar pulling job."

"It was Bass, all right," Ham said. "A squatter down on Yellow Creek saw him last night."

The sheriff thought that over. "This might not be so bad, after all. Now we've got a chance to get all three of them." He slapped his deputy on the back. "Now let's get some boys together and go after them."

They stopped at Holliday's Barber Shop and the sheriff said, "We're getting a posse together, boys. Meet at the jail in ten minutes." Rounding the bank corner, they almost ran into Miss Laura La Main.

"Why, Ham!" she smiled.

The deputy beamed. "Good morning, Miss La Main."

"My! Is that all you can say?" She pre-

tended to pout, twirling a tiny lace parasol in the deputy's face.

"Miss La Main," Sheriff Topatt said coolly, "it happens we're in a hurry. Three killers are on the loose in this county, so if you don't mind—"

"But I *do* mind," she smiled at Ham, ignoring the sheriff. "But I suppose it's more exciting hunting outlaws than talking to little me?"

Ham looked dismayed. "Oh, no, it's not that at all!"

The sheriff made an unpleasant sound in his throat "Well," Miss La Main said, pouting again, "I suppose if you must go, you must. But don't forget, you're to take me riding this afternoon."

"Look!" the sheriff exploded. "Ham may not be back for a week. So don't make plans—"

She didn't even hear him. "Don't forget," Laura La Main smiled. "This afternoon."

SITTING in his one-room office at the end of Main Street that afternoon, Sheriff Martin Topatt decided that something had to be done He would have to talk to that girl. He had to make it clear that he would stand for no interference.

It was four o'clock by his pocket watch. The posse had been out almost seven hours, and would probably be out a long time yet before they caught the Whitfields. The sheriff put on his hat and walked across the street to the Cattlemen's Bar.

"What'll it be, sheriff?" Burt Hotchkiss asked.

"I want to talk to that girl singer of yours, Miss Laura La Main."

Burt's eyes widened.

"What's the matter?" the sheriff demanded.

"It looks like your deputy beat your time, sheriff," the barkeeper grinned. "Ham Calvert took Miss La Main out a while ago, horseback riding, I think."

Sheriff Topatt felt as if he had been kicked. "You mean," he asked tightly, "that Ham brought the posse back just to take Miss La Main horseback riding?"

"That's the way it looks." Burt leaned across the bar, frowning. "What's the matter Sheriff? You don't look so good."

The sheriff didn't go back to the office. He didn't want to face people, feeling the way he did. He was hurt—hurt more than he liked to admit. He hadn't believed that anything on earth could make Ham Calvert slight his job He had handpicked the man, trained him, practically raised him. To think that he would throw everything up, with three killers on the loose, on account of a girl—and one with a name like *Laura La Main*, at that!

As he moped, he was forced to admit that he had overlooked something in the training of his deputy. He had taught him to shoot, how to handle hardcases. He hadn't taught him bravery, for the boy already had that. He had seemed the perfect man to step into the sheriff's job, but now it was clear that Ham Calvert had a weakness Topatt had not suspected.

Girls!

The sheriff spat, disgusted.

He thought of throwing everything up himself. The blazes with it! But he couldn't do it: too much of himself was in that boy.

Around suppertime he went around to the Holster House Hotel, which was just a white frame building during the trail driving days, took a chair in the front parlor and waited. Before long she came down the stairs, smiling vaguely, smelling loudly of lavender sachet.

"Miss La Main," the sheriff said.

She looked at him, not smiling now.

"I want to ask you to leave my deputy alone," he said, coming directly to the point. "I'm asking you not to interfere with his work."

Laura La Main looked blank for a moment. "Why, what a ridiculous idea! Why would I want to interfere with Ham's work?"

The sheriff forced himself not to shout. "Because he's a good-looking boy, I guess, ma'am."

Something seemed to amuse her. She walked swaying toward the door, and on her way she insolently patted Topatt on top of his bald head.

"Don't worry about it, Grandpa, there's nothing you can do. When Laura La Main sees a man she likes, she's going to get him!"

For what seemed like a long time, the sheriff sat in the Holster House parlor, grinding his teeth.

That night, before he had a chance to talk to Ham, the northbound stage came limping into Manville, the off lead-horse missing. The news swept over the town like grassfire. The three Whitfield boys had held up the

stage on the other side of Sandy River—shot one of the lead horses and damn near brained the driver with a pistol butt. Twelve hundred dollars in cash had been taken from the treasure chest, money which was being shipped to the Stock Raisers Bank.

It didn't take long to find Ham. The sheriff went to the Cattlemen's and there he was, sitting at a table with Laura La Main.

The sheriff's anger was furious and cold. He said bitingly, "Deputy Calvert, if you think you've got the time to spare, you might just drift down toward the Sandy and pick up the Whitfield boys." Then he leaned across the table and shouted full into Ham Calvert's face. "*And don't come back without them!*"

Laura La Main said indignantly, "Ham, don't take that kind of talk from the old goat!"

"You keep out of this!" the sheriff bellowed.

"Are you going to let him talk to me like that, Ham?"

The sheriff had enough. "Are you going," he demanded, "or are you going to hand in your star?"

"Don't go!" Miss La Main said.

"I've got to, Laura, it's my job."

The sheriff waited. Laura La Main waited. At last, swallowing hard, the deputy wheeled and headed for the door.

The sheriff thought, *I won! When the showdown came, his job was more important than she was.* But Laura La Main was looking at him, smiling grimly.

"Don't be so sure, Sheriff," she hissed. "I've only started to work on him!"

THE sheriff sat in his office until past midnight that night, thinking. If it had been anybody but Ham Calvert he would have kicked his pants and run him out of the county. But Ham had good stuff in him. He had proved that in the past. It wouldn't be right just to sit by and watch a woman like Laura La Main make a fool of him—to ruin a man who could make the town a good sheriff.

Sheriff Topatt wondered if he could run her out of town.

"On what charge?"

For making calf eyes at his promising young deputy?

In his long career as a law-enforcer he had never drummed up a charge against anybody, and he was too old to start now. Still, there must be a way....

Then—in the quiet of the night—he had an idea. He sat thinking about it, and, after a long while, he began to grin.

Forty miles—twenty to Big Rock and twenty back—is a long way to ride in a day, especially if you have turned sixty-four already, and your joints ache and creak, and your stiff body no longer seems to fit a saddle. But the sheriff made it. He got an early start, saddling up the next morning right after breakfast. Around noon he rode into the fly-blown little false-fronted town of Big Rock.

He went to a place called the Hogs-Head Bar where he found a big, well-dressed, blond-haired man disconsolately shuffling a deck of playing cards at an empty table.

"Looks like business is slow, Carp," the sheriff said.

Carp Taliaferro, the gambler, looked up.

"Topatt," he started to complain, "you're out of your county. You can't do anything to me here."

"Just down on a little business," the sheriff said calmly. "Anyway, I got nothing against you. I was telling the boys just the other day, 'Maybe we did wrong by Taliaferro. We should have let him stay in Manville—why, he'll starve to death in a place like Big Rock.' "

The gambler stared sharply. He had a stolid, rugged handsomeness, somewhat like that of a blooded Hereford bull. "Is that the truth?" he asked.

"Ask the boys," the sheriff said.

Carp Taliaferro sat back, shuffling his cards thoughtfully. "To tell the truth," he said, "business has been pretty slow...."

The sheriff left him with the thought.

"Where you been, Sheriff?" the liveryman wanted to know when he got back to Manville just before dark that night.

"Down to Big Rock on business. Anything new about the Whitfields?"

"There sure is! They stole a beef steer off the Bar-J range and butchered it on the spot. What's the matter with that deputy of yours, is he wearin' blinders?"

He was blinded, all right, but not the way the liveryman meant.

"The councilmen are worked up about it," the liveryman said. "They want action."

"I reckon," the sheriff grunted. He walked stiffly toward the office.

Around eight o'clock the Town Councilmen came in a group to complain about the slipshod way Ham Calvert was directing the search for the Whitfields. The sheriff had been expecting it—had himself braced for it.

"It's an outrage," Big Tom Norwood, the spokesman, said. "A deputy is no good to a town if he hangs out all the time in a saloon."

The others nodded sober agreement.

"The first thing you know," said Big Tom, "every hardcase south of Red River will be coming to Manville. They'll say we got no law here."

"Carp Taliaferro rode in a few minutes ago," another man said. "It looks like the word has already got around."

The sheriff lifted an eyebrow. Carp had taken action faster than he had expected. He smiled.

"I don't see nothin' funny," Big Tom said angrily. "We—the council, that is—have come to an agreement." He looked around to make sure they still stood behind him. "We decided . . . well, that Ham Calvert ought to be replaced. We ought to have a new deputy."

The sheriff hadn't thought that they would go this far. Not yet. He sat for a long moment, straightening papers on his desk. "Gentlemen," he said at last, "Ham is a good boy. He'll make this town a good sheriff some day. I know, because I've trained him, and worked with him. Why don't we give the boy a little time to get straightened out?"

"And let the Whitfields do as they please in the meantime?" Big Tom said. But some of his self-assurance had left him. The sheriff had been a great law officer in his day, and he still had a lot of friends in Manville. "How long do you think we can go on like this?" Big Tom demanded at last.

"Four, five days," the sheriff said easily. "The Whitfields won't run off if they think they're safe here."

Big Tom snorted. "You think Ham Calvert will straighten out in four, five days? I don't believe in miracles!"

The sheriff relaxed, knowing that he had won the first round. "Maybe I do," he said.

THE next day Carp Taliaferro was back in the Cattlemen's, doing business as usual. Ham Calvert, dead beat, came in around noon with the posse.

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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"I don't understand it," he said wearily. "I lost their trail three times. I can't seem to get my mind on it."

"Maybe you need to relax a while," the sheriff said in a fatherly tone. "Why don't you go over to the Cattlemen's and forget about it for a while? I guess the Whitfields aren't going to run away."

Ham blinked in surprise. "Well . . ." he said doubtfully, if you think so. . . ."

The sheriff watched him go.

Toward the middle of the afternoon Torry Sutton came in from his place on Green Prairie, complaining that three of his best cutting horses had been stolen during the night. The Whitfields, he claimed, had done it, and if the law didn't do something pretty damn soon. . . .

The sheriff pacified him with promises.

He waited, on edge, as the afternoon wore on. Maybe his plan hadn't been so good after all. Maybe he was getting a little addled in his old age. Then he saw Ham coming across the street toward the office and he felt that everything was going to work out.

"What's the idea," the deputy demanded, "letting Carp Taliaferro back in town?"

He looked upset, the sheriff thought. His face was dark with anger. The sheriff asked innocently, "Carp Taliaferro? Is he back?" He sat back, trying not to grin. "Well, there's only one thing to do, I guess. Run him out of town again."

"It'll be a pleasure," Ham said tightly. "On top of being a crooked gambler, he's been fooling around with Laura."

Sensing that he had said too much, he turned on one heel and headed again across the street toward the saloon.

The sheriff didn't have to wait long. He could hear the shouting and cursing from where he sat. A woman's voice—Miss La Main's—got into it. The sheriff lit a cigar, heaving a satisfied sigh. The row went on for another three or four minutes before he began to hear the crashing of furniture and shouting of men runing through the streets.

"Fight! Fight!"

Sheriff Martin Topatt carelessly flicked a cigar ash onto the floor.

"The deputy and Taliaferro, they're fighting!"

Miss Laura La Main's shrill voice slashed like a razor. She screamed words that the sheriff had never heard a woman voice before. The El Paso stage rounded into Main Street, and the sheriff took his feet off the desk and went to the door.

More furniture crashed. He could hear the sodden sounds of fists hammering against bone and muscle. Then the batwing doors flew open and Carp Taliaferro hit the plankwalk with the seat of his pants. Laura La Main clawed and scratched at Ham like a she-wildcat. Some men pulled her away.

The sheriff called to Buff Struk, the stage driver. "Hold it up a minute, Buff. I think you've got some passengers."

Ham Calvert stood spread-legged on the plankwalk, saying something to the gambler. Taliaferro got up slowly. Miss La Main spat at Ham.

The sheriff walked into the street and said to some men, "Boys, why don't you give Miss La Main a hand with her baggage?"

He could hear her yelling that she was leaving Manville and she hoped she never saw the place again. Ham Calvert said it was all right with him; that she could go and take her crooked gambler with her. The stage was waiting.

The deputy was shaking with anger. He looked as if he could punch holes in the Cattlemen's walls.

Later, in the office, Sheriff Topatt watched his deputy pace the floor like a caged tiger, muttering bitterly to himself. "Women! Last night she said she liked me. Today she was playing up to Taliaferro. A tinhorn!"

Sheriff Topatt cleared his throat as Ham stared angrily into space. "What about the Whitfields?" he asked quietly.

"What about them?" Ham demanded without thinking.

"Do you feel like bringing them in?"

The deputy clenched and unclenched his hands. Very deliberately he buckled on a cartridge belt and a forty-five.

"I'll have them in jail before nightfall," he said tightly, tramping out of the office and heading toward the livery barn.

For a long while the sheriff sat, doing nothing, thinking that the kid would get over it. He was young, and someday he would find the right girl. For a while, though, Manville was going to be a tough town to break laws in.

Lighting a cigar, the sheriff remembered the look of hurt pride that had been in Ham Calvert's eyes. He could almost feel sorry for the Whitfields—considering what they were going to be up against. ✪ ✪ ✪

Next Issue

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Published May 2nd

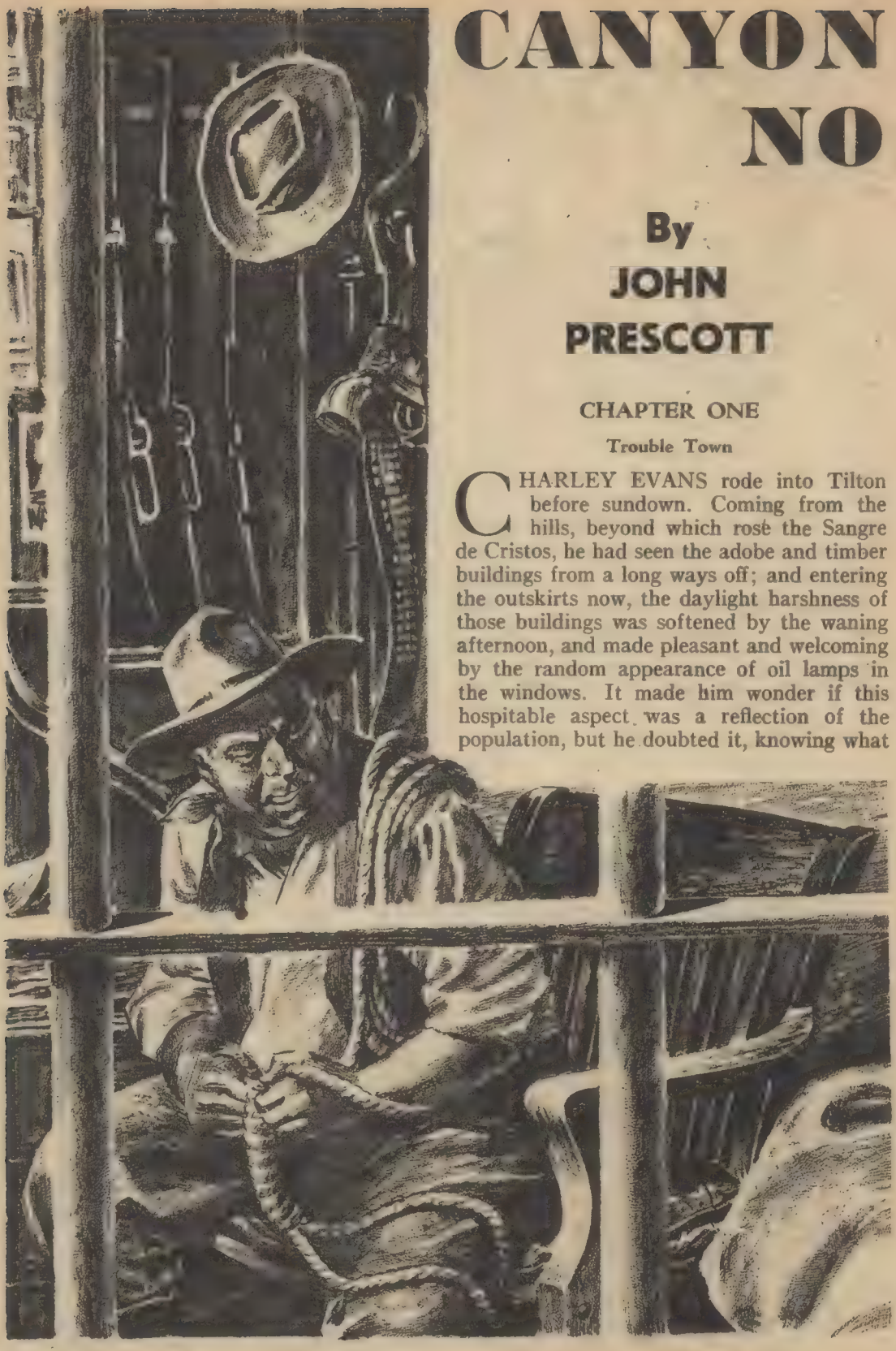
Howdy, friends. Instead of just telling you about the yarns we have coming up in future issues, from now on we're also going to show you some of the scenes! Next issue, we'll have Joseph Chadwick's action-packed tale, "Home is the Killer!" It's about Ed Hagerty, who's serving a life sentence for a murder he never committed. . . .

When Ed found out that Lawyer George Carlson —who'd defended Ed at his trial—had bought up Ed's spread and struck oil on it, the lifer decided it was time to go home—the hard way. . . .

The first person Ed looked up after breaking out of prison was his wife, Helen. But Helen had taken herself a new husband—George Carlson! Ed got himself a gun and went hunting.

He found George Carlson in the oil field. And with him was Dodson, the man whose lying testimony had sent Ed up. A confession from these two would set Ed free.

But an oil field can be a treacherous range for a cowhand, and the next thing Ed knew, he was fleeing for his life through a sea of flaming oil. For what happened then—read the next issue!



CANYON NO

By JOHN PRESCOTT

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble Town

CHARLEY EVANS rode into Tilton before sundown. Coming from the hills, beyond which rose the Sangre de Cristos, he had seen the adobe and timber buildings from a long ways off; and entering the outskirts now, the daylight harshness of those buildings was softened by the waning afternoon, and made pleasant and welcoming by the random appearance of oil lamps in the windows. It made him wonder if this hospitable aspect was a reflection of the population, but he doubted it, knowing what

OF RETURN

Charlie Evans figured he knew now who'd bushwhacked his brother—the man who grinned and joked with him from beyond the bars, while his busy fingers fashioned the thirteenth knot in the rope. . . .

he did about the place. Tilton, these days, was enjoying the reputation of being a trouble town. Had it not been for his brother Grat, he never would have thought of coming here at all.

But Tilton had a nice look to it that evening and Charley could well appreciate how it had appealed to Grat in less troublesome times. It nestled in a comfortable, old-shoe manner at the lower spurs of the hills;

"Is that for me?" Charlie asked.

it had a vigorous stream flowing through the middle of it. Fine old cottonwoods grew along the watercourse, and here and there an acequia drew irrigation water off toward the tilled fields beyond the buildings. And as though taking their flavor from the ageless trees and creek, the adobe homes, and more ambitious mercantile establishments, had the appearance of having been there a long time.

Charley turned his horse in at the livery barn and went into a nearby barroom. The ride had made him dry, but beyond the gratifying of this thirst he was thinking that what he had to learn could best be gleaned from some central source of information. And few sources could match a town saloon. If Grat's dying moments had been more lucid, a stop in town would not have been necessary at all, but Grat hadn't had much time.

THE barkeep, a tall, stringy man of middle-age, with a deep scar crossing the lids of one eye, poured whiskey into a glass and accepted payment solemnly. It was too early for the heavy night trade, and he had the time to linger after making change. Charley knew the type, and because a friend in Tilton would be worth a dozen enemies, he cooperated.

"Look," he said, "I'm new here, and I'm hunting a feller named Casey Simon. Can you tell me where his place is?"

The barkeep mopped the bar in a careful manner.

"I expect I could tell you that, all right, but night ain't a very good time to send you out there."

Charley smiled around the rim of his glass. "That's a mighty nice way to put it. I'll tell you, then—he's never seen my face before, but he'll know my name because my brother used to work with him. Grat Evans was a partner of his. My name's Charley."

The barkeep put his towel on the bar and extended his hand.

"I'll shake with you, Charley. I know your brother—not well, but I know him. You look a bit like him, danged if you don't. Call me Squint."

"Thanks, I will. Squint's quite a name."

"That's 'cause of my eye. It's got a kind of twist in it. I one time fell into a stampede and got busted up—sprang my underpinning, too. But I can see all right."

"You punch beef one time?" Charley asked. He had the idea that Squint was a lonely man, that he enjoyed being asked about himself.

Squint picked up the bar rag again and examined it. "I did one time. Until that happened. I been doin' this since." His voice had a wistful sound to it.

Charley took a sip before he spoke again. Then he said, "Is that eye good enough for you to tell me how the way to Casey Simon's looks?"

"It's good enough for that, but like I say, night ain't a very good time to go out there." Squint picked up a glass and polished it with deliberation. "Fact is, Casey's place ain't a very good place to go at any time. Your brother Grat left at just the right time. Most everybody knows Casey's about done in this country."

Charley turned his empty glass on the bar. "Uh-huh, I had a notion to that effect."

Squint regarded Charley with a sharp, one-eyed glance. "Grat, huh? Well, if he told you, why you askin' me these things? It ain't a good thing to do in this town, nowadays anyway. If I hadn't seen the looks you bear to Grat you wouldn't 'a got anything from me but the whiskey."

"Oh, hell, don't get excited—I ain't tryin' to put you in no spot. If I'd got all I needed from Grat I wouldn't bother you. Trouble is, he didn't last long. He just got home, that was all."

The lid of Squint's bad eye flickered down. "What?"

"Grat's dead." Charley said it quietly. "Somewhere 'tween here and Santa Fe he was shot. He just did make the place where I was workin' at near there."

Squint stood there and stared at him. "Shot, huh. Grat shot. Charley Evans, listen to me. You'll do me a favor if you don't talk about our chat here. I never shoulda said a word. Grat shot. Huh."

Charley put his change in his pocket. Off-hand, he couldn't recall ever seeing fear take hold of a man in just that way. "Don't worry. I need friends, not enemies. Not that we had such a chat. You ain't even told me where Simon lives."

Squint brought his eyes around to the bar again. He began to rub it vigorously with the rag. "Felix Canyon. Take the south road, then follow the Felix west. You'll come to it. Be careful, though. You'll be mighty close to Riston's land."

"Riston? Who's that?"

Squint didn't look up. "Snake Riston. He's just Snake Riston, that's all."

CHARLEY went outside and stood in the street just beyond the patch of yellow light coming through the window of the bar. It was well into early evening now and he was half inclined to spend the night in Tilton. A tight chill had settled onto everything and a night search in strange country was not appealing with the temperature the way it was. On the other hand, he had a notion that it might be preferable to remaining in town for any length of time, things being what they were.

Inside the livery, the Mexican boy in momentary charge advised him that he had become the object of local interest in his absence.

"Hallo, Señor Evans, I feed your horse and he is ready. I get him for you now."

"Wait a minute; how'd you know my name, feller? I don't think I gave it when I came in."

The Mexican boy smiled as they walked along the aisle which split the building down the middle. "No, it is true you did not. It was given me by another. Soon after you are here he comes and demands to see your horse, which I show to him because this man is large and I am small. I learn some years ago to do what large ones demand of me."

Charley Evans laughed. "Perhaps, then, since I am also larger, you will tell me who this person is." He was conscious of falling into the boy's oddly musical patois.

"Si, yes, since that is true, I will. He is one called Curley, who has a large nose and who sometimes drinks too much. He works sometimes at the jail, and soon after you depart he presents himself to ask of the horse. When I show it to him he regards it with anger and declares, 'Evans, damn it all to hell—he did come back at that.' What do you think of that, Señor?"

"I think he made a mistake," Charley said. "This horse's never been here before."

"I think he decides that by simply watching you arrive. Are you not the Señor Evans?"

"Yeah, but a different one than he was thinkin' of. I guess he was thinkin' of Grat, my brother. I'm Charley."

"So, it is true. I think, myself, I see you before, but I am not certain. Grat is a fine one. One time he gives me a dollar. I hope it goes well with him."

Charley mounted up before he answered. Then he sat there looking down at the round, brown face gazing up at him with earnest, large eyes. "What's your name, son?"

"Pepe, Señor; and I am sixteen years."

"Pepe. A good name. Here, catch." Charley tossed a silver cartwheel down and the boy's hand cupped it.

"Muchas gracias, Señor—you are like your brother, certain. Again, I hope it is well with him."

"He's dead, Pepe." And Charley rode out.

He was well out of town, riding the south road, before he knew that he was being followed. Every now and then he'd pause to listen to such sounds as carried in the night, and during one of these times he heard the hooves coming toward him from the rear. It didn't surprise him to hear these and he was half in mind to leave the trail and wait.

On second thought, he continued on, being careful to keep the spacing wide enough. Other than possible identification of the trailer, hiding out would serve no purpose, and might lead to something altogether bad.

Crossing the Felix at a shallow ford, he turned west and followed the south bank in the direction of the canyon. There was no moon that night, but the stars were large and luminous and they provided sufficient light for him to see by. He could tell quite well that he was still some distance from Simon's place, but the shadowy lift of land to either side told him this might not exceed a few miles.

He had covered something like half of this imagined distance when, he reined up and discovered that he was alone again. When the trailing rider had left his track he couldn't say, but he was gone now, and Charley felt uneasy. He hadn't enjoyed being dogged in that fashion, but he'd rather have the unknown where he could keep an ear on him than off somewhere out of hearing distance.

But he wasn't out of hearing distance long. Very suddenly the hoofbeats sounded once again, to his right this time, and much closer than before—just across the river from what he could judge. There seemed to be a quality of haste in this sound, and because of this Charley swung his horse around and dropped from the saddle. At the same time a shot

crashed into the silent darkness and the slug swung off a nearby rock in a whining ricochet.

CHARLEY thumbed his own gun toward the streak of fire which flashed across the water. The sound of the ricochet was still dying eerily away when he sent three rounds in the direction from which the first had come, and he was gratified to hear a yelp of pain; this sounding sharp above the hoofbeats, which now accelerated and pounded off into the malpais and coarse brush beyond the Felix.

Receding rapidly, they stopped again at a distance which Charley imagined to be a hundred yards or more. Since he was by nature resentful of those who took to bushwhacking, he had half a mind to track the sound and finish the business then and there, but then the vision of a trap set in a lonesome, unknown land loomed in his mind, and presently discretion got the upper hand.

Moving again, he became aware in a while of the narrowing of the shelf above the Felix. The ground was pitching up more sharply now, and to his left the sheets of rock and random boulders were pressing down upon him. Ahead, he could clearly see the canyon entrance, and as he drew nearer he could tell that the Felix emerged from it in such a way as to compel him to cross the water to more level ground upon the other bank. For the first time since he'd left town he recalled what Squint had said to him about Snake Riston, and it occurred to him that he might have been waylaid upon the land of that unknown person.

He was still examining that possibility, and urging his horse across the water and up the other bank and into the canyon proper, when, abruptly, someone rose up behind a growth of scrub and held a rifle on him. Charley didn't move.

"What're you doin' in here?" this person said.

"I'm just ridin' thorugh, that's all," Charley said. "I'm goin' in to see a man named Casey Simon."

"What do you want with him?" The rifle was steady on his middle.

"I just want to talk with him, that's all. I got a message."

"Message, huh? What sort of message? What's your name?"

"Name of Charley Evans, and the message I'm deliverin' is from my brother."

The rifle lowered slightly. "Grat's kid brother, huh? All right, what you got to say?"

"Grat was shot. That's all. I come to see about it."

Charley didn't get a good look at Casey Simon until they'd come to the cabin deep inside the canyon, a ride which required the better part of half an hour to make. And since Casey seemed disinclined to conversation Charley occupied the time of night in trying to get a mental picture of the physical aspect of the place that they were riding into.

There was not much that he could see, but he received an impression of immense size and depth. Assuming that the Felix flowed through the center, the width of that canyon was enormous; and there was no telling how far it went in length. The walls to either side crashed into the sky dramatically and he realized immediately their protective value in times of storm and winter snow. He was aware of the grass, over which they rode, being deep and lush, and likely better than any other in that country. He began to understand why Grat had been so enthusiastic in his letters. This was a place well worth the time of any man to keep—and well worth the time of others to try and take away.

The cabin where Casey Simon lived lay in a grove of juniper a hundred yards or so back from the water. These trees were bushy, well-nourished things and the cabin appeared small because of them. But as Charley dismounted and gave his horse to Casey for turning into the pole corral, he saw that the house was more commodious than he had thought at first. It had the aspect of a place that had been built to last.

WHEN Casey lit the lamp and brought the coffee pot and two tin cups to the wide table before the fireplace Charley got his first good look at him. Why he had imagined that Casey would be a young man like himself, or anyway, Grat's age, he couldn't say, but he saw now that Casey was forty at least, and like as not a few years further on than that.

If he didn't take into consideration the fact that men in that country sometimes appeared more aged than they really were, then Casey's gray-shot hair, bandy-legged walk, defiant face and energetic body would make

him pass for fifty anyway. But he had youth in his blue and snapping eyes, and it had long been Charley's understanding that a man's true age could best be judged by his eyes.

For the first time since they'd left the canyon entrance Casey spoke to him. "Grat shot. I ain't surprised none. Alone on the trail's the only way they could've got him. God knows I begged him not to go, but he had that girl in Santa Fe."

"He wanted to get married," Charley said. "He'd writ me about it, and said he was comin' up to get her. He come, all right. He got to this place where I was workin', but he couldn't have gone another quarter mile. As it was, he died almost as soon I got him down."

Casey Simon took the pot back to the wood stove to warm it up. Standing there, he rolled a shuck, then tossed the makings on the table for Charley to help himself.

"Yeah, dammit," he said. "That's the way it goes."

"You got any ideas?" Charley poured tobacco into the paper carefully.

"Sure, I got ideas. Can't prove nothin', though. My money says it's Snake Riston, or one of his bunch, which is pretty much the same."

"I heard about him," Charley said. "Might be one of his that opened up on me when I was comin' out tonight."

"Likely," Casey said. He picked up the pot and brought it back to the table. "I heard it and that's why I come out. I expect you was trailed. Or were you picked up when you hit his land?"

"Was that his land I was on?"

"Dang tootin'. He owns everything from the canyon south to the road, and to hell and gone beyond it. And he wants to get the canyon. Best grass and water for a thousand miles."

"I didn't know it was his. Squint told me to be careful about gettin' on it, but he didn't say exactly where it was. But I was trailed from town—I heard the tracker some time before I come to the Felix. I think it might have been a man named Curley, but I can't be sure."

"Curley Schofield. Squint tell you 'bout him? Seems to me Squint's gettin' mighty mouthy namin' names. Trouble with him is, ever since he got ruined in a stampede he's been runnin' that bar and he gets into the middle of everything that happens. I don't know that I'd set too much store by what he says. Well, anyway, Curley's one of Riston's men. He's a log-headed sot from where I sit. Sometimes picks up a couple of bucks doin' turnkey duty at the jail. Tricky, though, and you won't find 'em more treacherous."

"Might have been him, then, only it wasn't Squint that told me about him. It was Pepe, at the livery barn. He said Curley was lookin' at my horse and havin' a guess at who I was. He thought the rider was Grat at first."

"Pepe ought to be more careful, too. He's still young, but that don't make no difference —not with a guy like Curley."

"You sound like we ain't got many friends."

"Well, we ain't got a hell of a lot of 'em. Leastwise, not many who'd own up to it. Riston, he's got everybody buffaloed. His bunch does pretty much what they please, and he owns just about everything around here worth owning, except what we got here, and what Henry Dodge has got—which is considerable, too.

"I guess I could call him a friend, anyway, he don't act like no enemy, and he liked Grat a lot. He's always been nice to me about loans and the like."

"Who, Dodge? Who's he?"

Casey squinted into his coffee cup as though he was searching in there for an answer. "Well, he's different, I can say that much. He's got himself a bank and a feed mill and I don't hardly know how many acres with nice, fat cattle on 'em. Yet, with all that to care for he still gives you the notion that he might go to church now and then, too."

"And Snake don't bother him none?"

"If he has, I ain't heard about it. He's too big for Snake, and what's more, he's smarter and a guy like Snake's respectful of brains. If them two went to war there'd never be an end of it."

"You said something about him liking Grat; I'd like to meet him some time. He might appreciate knowing what happened back in Santa Fe."

"We'll go into town in the morning," Casey said. "You can see him then. I guess he would appreciate knowing that. He gave Grat a lot of help in getting the stock that Grat wanted to raise out here."

CHAPTER TWO

Embattled Canyon

THE morning sky was touching the canyon walls with saffron when they saddled up and headed down the Felix toward the Tilton Road.

"There ain't but three ways out of this canyon," Casey Simon said. "Where the Felix enters and leaves—a distance of ten miles or so from end to end—and a steep draw going up one side, a mile or so west of the cabin."

"If there's them other ways, why are we comin' out the way I come in last night? I thought this was Riston's land."

"The land is," Casey said, "but not the water. I'll walk in the water any damned time it pleases me. Anyway, it's shorter."

They came to the Tilton road without incident, and headed north.

"What was this stock Dodge helped Grat with?" Charley asked after a time. "Grat never said much about that in his letters."

"Black Angus," Casey said. "When Grat come in with me he wanted to raise prime beef stock. I had that canyon all to myself for nigh onto ten years and I raised mostly Reds, until about five years back when I went for whitefaces. But when Grat saw that grass he said we had to have some Angus in there; he surely got excited over that. So, that's how he got Dodge to help. Them Angus cost a heap more than either of us could scrape together, even with selling off the Herefords like we did, but Dodge helped us. He loaned the money. Nothing like that had ever been raised around here before, and I guess it got him curious—the possibilities, I mean."

"I see. How much owing to Dodge now?"

"Something less than five thousand, but it won't be no trouble to meet. We was just getting ready to ship when Grat went home. He was to bring his wife back, and we were going to ship right after."

Charley rode quietly, thinking it over. The sun was well up and the air was warming.

After a time he smiled at Casey. "If it didn't sound so crazy, I'd say it almost looked like someone, somewhere, didn't want you to ship."

Coming into Tilton, they went directly to Henry Dodge's bank and feed mill, up an outside stairway to an office Casey said he had up there on the second floor. Charley wondered if Dodge would be there with the sun just crossing the ridges to the east, but Casey said so; and he was.

"By golly, you do look like Grat, Charley," Henry Dodge said when the names were passed around. Dodge was a solid, comfortable-looking man of middle age, whose voice and manner bespoke his importance in the area. He was sitting in a chair behind a dusty, cluttered desk and Charley had the impression that he used the office less as a place of business than a quiet spot where he could come and sit when he had a mind to. He had a good view from where he sat, and there was hardly anything along the street he couldn't see.

"I'm sure sorry to hear about Grat," Dodge continued. "The word got around after you'd stopped by Squint's last night. I do declare that was a shock—a nice, go-gettin' feller like Grat. Do you mind tellin' how it happened?"

Charley didn't, and he told it briefly.

"I don't suppose he was able to say who done it."

"No. No, I don't think he even saw. He got it in the back."

Henry Dodge glared at the pencil he was doodling with. His gray-white brows forged across the bridge of his nose, which was bowed, and which shone with reflected light.

"Some damned sidewinder, no doubt," he said; then he set the pencil down and looked at Charley. "Well, you goin' to carry on, boy? I figure Grat'd like it if you did."

"Until I find who done him in, I will—and until Grat's share of that debt is paid. But I can't say beyond that."

"Why, damn your hide, Charley!" Casey flared. "You'd be a danged fool to give up Grat's share in that canyon. That's the best grazing land from here to hell and back! Ain't it, Henry?"

Henry Dodge laughed. "I'd say he's right, Charley. I sure wish I had it. I think you'd be a fool not to stay on. We got a nice little town, here, too, even though she's still a bit rough around the edges, but a man couldn't rightly ask for a better place. And there's no rush about that debt. I'd rather see you build up a good, healthy herd than sell off what might be the best of it to meet my note."

Charley ran his hands along his levis.

"Well, that'll take some thinking. Anyway, I'll stay for awhile."

THEY spun some more talk before Charley and Casey left. Henry Dodge allowed that he'd been having trouble, too, though surely not in the manner or degree that Casey had. But he'd had an old timey spring go dry for no reason in the world, and a lion had got loose amongst the new calves, and then to top it off, didn't he go and fall off his horse the other day and lame himself up? Trouble sure did come in bunches, didn't it? Enough to try a man's soul, it sometimes was.

Charley and Casey agreed, yes, it surely was, and went downstairs to the street. Charley was thinking that Henry Dodge was one of the greatest talkers he'd seen in all his days, and he was about to advise Casey of this notion, when the sound of a scuffle in the livery barn across the street attracted his attention. Immediately, he thought of Pepe, the Mexican boy, and then his mind went beyond that to Casey's character analysis of Curley Schofield, and he began to run.

It was dark inside, but he saw the two just beyond the doors. The back of the large man blocked Charley's view of Pepe, but he saw enough of the boy's face to know that he was getting mauled. Without stopping, he jerked on the shoulder and swung his fist.

All the time he was thinking that this was Curley Schofield and that Curley Schofield, aside from his reputation, was very likely the same one who had tried to wing him in the night. Because of this, he put a considerable amount of weight behind his fist and he was pleased to see Curley's wide, bulbous nose spray red in a fine and generous stream. Two more stiff ones in the same gory and tender area served to knock him into a stall partition, from which he slid to the floor, and stared, glassy-eyed.

Getting a grip on one arm, Casey helped Charley heave Curley into the street, where, after flinging him into the dirt, Casey had a word for him.

"Now, then, you whey-brained, sheep-faced, shambling exile from hell's half-acre, let that be a lesson, if you got the wits to absorb it! You want to look around some 'afore you start beatin' up on kids!"

"And before you think of bushwhackin' in the Felix," Charley said, glowering.

Curley Schofield groped in the dirt with his hands and pushed himself up slowly. On his feet, he hunched in an apelike manner and his eyes smoked out through a red haze.

"I don't know who you are, feller, but you'll beg mercy of me some day."

"Name is Evans—Charley Evans—and you knew that last night. Or do you drygulch total strangers for the hell of it?"

"I ain't bushwacked nobody, but I ain't sayin' I won't start!"

Charley eased his hand down toward his gun. "Beat it," he said.

Curley stood watching Charley's hand move. For a moment it seemed that he might take a chance, and Charley was half hoping that he would. But then this wary weighing-things-up look went out of his face, and without having any more to say he turned around and shambled off.

Watching him, something occurred to Charley which he hadn't thought about before. "That guy don't look like he's hurt nowhere," he said to Casey. "And, you know, I got a yelp out of the one who tried to tag me."

BY THE end of the week they were ready to ship. As Casey had said, there was never any trouble rounding up the stock in the canyon, and the whole business, down to selecting the stock to go, and the branding of the new calves, took but a few days. Charley hadn't thought much of accepting Henry Dodge's offer on the note. It was nice of the old guy, but he didn't want to be beholden to anyone for any longer than he had to. So they were going to move the stock on out to market.

Because of what Charley considered the danger of reprisal, and also because they could use the help, they'd got Pepe out to the canyon to lend a hand. Casey'd had some misgivings about this, but Pepe appeared to be more competent with a rope and branding iron than his age would seem to indicate, and he was a natural-born centaur when it came to horsemanship.

During these days Charley thought a good deal about Snake Riston, whom he hadn't even seen yet, but he decided that any kind of showdown there would have to wait until the stock was out. For one thing, he didn't want a range war to cut loose while they

were trying to get the stock out of the canyon, and for another, he didn't feel that he knew enough about Riston yet to be sure that he'd been the truly guilty party in the death of Grat. It would take some study yet.

On the day that Casey went to Tilton to make arrangements for shipping space Charley waited until the other man had left, then rode down the canyon and up the draw to the north of the cabin. When he reached the rim a ragged trail led away through a stoney wilderness, but except for that trail, everything else, for as far as he could see, belonged to Riston.

Charley's reasons for coming up here were vague, largely curiosity to learn more about the land around the canyon. He went leisurely along the trail and gave a careful study to the sweep of Riston's land. He knew he was not seeing a tenth of it, but such of it as was revealed to him enabled him to understand why Riston might covet the richness of the canyon. There was grass up here, but it was a wiry, sparse growth, overgrazed by Riston's cattle and much abused by the hard winds which blew in certain seasons; it was stunted from the never-ending search for nutrition in the rocky hardpan from which it grew.

Where the grass failed to grow the hardpan lay like lava badlands, or was bent and heaved from the subterranean convulsions which had seized the country in a time gone by. Here and there rugged pinyon grew haphazardly in clumps, and occasionally he would see a cedar outcrop clutching perilously to the ground or to the seams and fractures in the rocks. Altogether, it was not a land which impressed him with its capacity for nourishment.

In the back of his mind there still lingered these things he didn't understand, and as he went along he brought them up for further examination. Granted that Riston had been trying to wrest the canyon from Casey Simon for many years, why then should Henry Dodge risk incurring Riston's emnity by aiding Grat and Casey in their venture with the Angus cattle? Charley's thought was that Dodge was certainly a force to reckon with, and, on the surface anyway, surely Riston's match when it came to mental agility, but it seemed that, in befriending Grat he had been asking for it. Quite possibly Henry Dodge was more powerful than Charley had realized.

Charley came out of his wonderings and discovered the day was getting on. He'd come up here to the rim in the early hours of morning and now the sun was telling him that noon had come and gone. Very likely, Casey had returned and would be curious about his absence, and there seemed nothing further to be gained up here. Come to think of it, nothing had been gained at all, except a deepening of the questions in his mind.

Emerging from the draw, he saw the sleek, black cattle gathered on the canyon floor. They stood in contented, idle groups, nuzzling at the deep grass, or sucking up the Felix water; and watching them, the thought occurred to him that, even though he was a stranger in this country he could never ask for anything more pleasing in this land or any other. He remembered how he'd been unsure about remaining here once he had Grat's affairs cleaned up, but now he felt that indecision giving way to a deep desire to live his life forever in this canyon. Maybe Dodge was right about the town, too; those rough edges might wear down in time.

Made oddly light-hearted by these thoughts, he spurred the horse and rode at a full gallop toward the river. Just short of the bank, he wheeled to the left and sent the bay horse pounding along the river's course toward the cabin in the distance. To either side of him the stolid Angus raised their heads in dumb question, and as he skidded up to the cabin door Pepe ran out and gaped at him.

"Caramba, Señor, does the devil chase you?"

Quieting the horse, Charley remained in the saddle, and laughed. "No devil on my tail, Pepe—I just feel good. I guess it's the first time I really felt good since I came. Casey back?"

"No, no, he is still away, and I am wondering. He was to come immediately."

"You think he stopped somewhere for a game of monte?"

Pepe considered this, then shook his head. "No, I do not think so. I remember exactly when I saddle his horse he tells me he will come back pronto. Yes, he was positive of that."

Charley sat there. He was hungry, and his stomach churned as the odor of coffee, bacon and frijoles assailed him from within the cabin. As one part of his mind received and appreciated this olfactory feast another

part was re-examining a thought he'd had not so very long ago; when he'd said to Casey, "If it didn't sound so crazy, I'd say it almost looked like someone didn't want you to ship."

Recalling that, he felt a sudden sense of urgency, and he swung the bay around, calling back to Pepe as he raked the spurs along the tawny flanks. "I'd better see! Likely nothing, but I better have a look. And take care while I'm gone. Take care!"

CHARLEY rode to Tilton in a hurry. The more he considered the possibility of tampering with Casey Simon's chosen course the more the thought appealed to him. He didn't yet know Casey very well, but the fiery little man had impressed him as a person not easily swerved from a path of action. Since he'd said to Pepe that he was coming back directly, then he would—if he could.

Tilton lay warm and lazy in the early afternoon. The streets were quiet and devoid of life, exuding a soft somnolence to any person passing through. Had it not been for the horses lazing at the hitchracks along the central thoroughfare, Charley might easily have assumed that all the citizens had deserted the town entirely, to return, perhaps, at some unnamed future hour.

But the horses held the clue and in a while he discovered Casey's drowsing at the rack in front of Squint's. His first reaction was one of vast relief, and there was no cause for this to change until he'd tied his own beside it, and stepped inside the bar. If Casey wanted to celebrate the shipping with a drink, why, then, he'd have one with him.

Within the bar, however, there was no sign of celebration. Half a dozen men or thereabouts lingered around the glasses, and Charley became aware of an atmosphere of latent menace. Except for Casey, who was half plastered, and Squint and Curley, Charley didn't recognize them. One of them, a squat, pinch-faced man in careless dress seemed to answer a description that Casey had one time given him of Riston, and he assumed the other two unknowns to be his wranglers.

Snake Riston introduced himself with laughter, and an invitation. "I surely guess it's time old Snake met up with another Evans, and I'm glad you stopped by to let me buy a drink for you."

Charley kept an eye on Snake, but he didn't answer right away. Now that he was in the place the impression that he'd first received became distinctly ominous. There was something going on in here he didn't like. It was in the eyes of all of them, even Squint's, whose bad one was narrowed down to the thinness of a dime.

Charley put his hand on Casey's arm. "Come on, Casey, let's go. Pepe's got the bacon on."

Casey had evidently been there some little time. He didn't appear to resent Charley's intrusion, but it was clear that he was not prepared to leave. "Charley, my boy," he crooned in a well-greased voice, "all things in their time. We're 'bout to become men o' wealth, and as befits our station, we got to celebrate with these peons here."

This produced a round of laughter, and Snake placed another whiskey into Casey's fumbling hands. "I do declare, you're right," he said. "It ain't every day us peasants gets a chance to drink with an up and coming cattle baron. You don't want to hurry a man like that, Evans."

Charley looked carefully around. All the others were regarding him with expectation. Curley's face had a peculiar, vivid light in it, and one of the wranglers began to edge away from the central group.

Charley tightened his grip on Casey's arm. "Come on, old pard, we got work to do. We ain't rich 'til we get paid."

Casey came away from the bar in sections. He spilled his drink and staggered as the weight of his body shifted from his elbows on the bartop to his scarred and battered boots upon the floor. This caused him to lean heavily on Charley, and to keep himself from stumbling Charley had to wrap his arms around Casey's chest in order to support him.

It happened very quickly. No sooner had he gathered Casey in his arms, and taken the full bulk of his body against his chest, than Snake slipped his hand down and went for Charley's Colt. Though Charley caught this shadowed motion from the tail of his eyes he wasn't quick enough to stop it. The gun was already out and leveled when Charley let Casey fall and flung himself at Riston.

If he'd been a second sooner he would have got the gun. His hand was less than two feet away from the dull blue barrel when the hammer fell and a smash of flame

tore underneath his arm. Snake Riston's eyes were laughing, filled with simple pleasure, as Casey Simon screamed and bucked before he fell. Half turned in his wild swing at Snake, Charley saw the deep rent in Casey's back and the richness of the pumping spurts that followed. He never did see Curley's gun descend upon his head.

CHAPTER THREE

Noose Hangs High

THE man named Curley wove the hangman's knot with an artist's touch. Through the strap-iron lattice of the cell door, Charley had been watching him ever since he'd regained consciousness, and he was impressed with the dexterity of Curley's splayed and blunted fingers.

"That for me?" he asked presently, and Curley turned his body on the stool, and grinned.

"Damned tootin', it is. I'm givin' it my special touch."

"A jury's goin' to hear this thing first. My money says that Riston wears that collar."

"A jury'll hear it, that's for sure, but you'll lose your money placin' bets. It's all arranged."

"Like that, huh?"

"Just like that. Witnesses and everythin'."

At the far end of the building which served Tilton as a jail, a door was opened and Charley could see the portly figure of Henry Dodge advancing down the short hall. Curley rose with deference, and at a scowl from Dodge, departed with his handiwork. Dodge relaxed upon the stool and looked at Charley.

"My boy, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am that this thing has come to pass," he began. "I want you to know that I'm going to engage the best lawyer available for your defense. It may be that you can escape with life imprisonment."

Charley moved to a sitting position on the planked shelf which served him as a bed. Until this moment everything had been unreal and bizarre, and even ludicrous, but now something tight came into his back and made him sit straight on the roughhewn board.

"By God, you sound like you think I'm guilty! I tell you Riston done that killin'. Blew Casey near in half. And that would-be hangman, Curley, slugged me into the well."

Henry Dodge raised a fleshy hand. "You'll have every opportunity to explain that to your lawyer, son—I'm only here to advise you that I'll get the best for you."

"But, why in hell would I kill Casey? Snake Riston's a lyin', back-shootin' killer and you know it as well as I do. There's your man, not me."

Henry Dodge examined a spot of dust upon the fine material of his trousers. "I know Riston's reputation leaves much to be desired, but such officialdom as exists here has to act on the basis of the evidence available. Casey's death was caused by your gun, and witnesses report that you were arguing with him, and that in the heat of it you shot him."

"Witnesses! Riston, Curley, and a pair of saddletramps! All in Riston's pay." A new thought occurred to Charley, and he leaned toward Dodge intently. "Have they talked with Squint? He's on his own."

"As a matter of fact, I checked with him quite carefully. I'm sorry to say that he concurs in evidence with the others."

As Charley sat there, staring vacantly, Henry Dodge had some other things to say. He revealed that he had influence with the district courts and that he would see to it that the canyon ranch and stock were held in trust until such time as sentence was passed for the crime committed. In fact, Dodge would be pleased to give this matter his full and undivided attention.

When he was finished he walked away and Charley glared after him with an emptiness he had never felt before. But his concentration on his misery was not so intense that he failed to notice the distinct limp in Dodge's walk. He remembered that Dodge had mentioned falling off his horse, and he wondered now why such a trivial thing should come into his mind. It certainly had no place in his present contemplations, but there it was.

WHEN sundown came Curley brought an evening meal, and though he'd had nothing since morning, Charley ate it absently.

"You ought to show more respect for Squint's cookin'," Curley remarked after Charley had poked about on his plate for a time. "He cooks damned good."

"He cooks stories too," Charley replied.

"Now, you don't want to hold that against him. Ever since he ain't been a ridin' hand he's easy to push around. He does what he's told." Curley winked a swollen, battered eye. "Life's easy when you know where your bread's buttered."

Munching on a ham sandwich, Charley considered what Curley said. Casey had one time referred to Squint's fence-sitting, and that he should now cast his weight with those who held the firepower didn't seem to violate the pattern. People like Squint developed a knack for watching out for number one.

He was about to voice this observation when his teeth encountered an obstacle in the sandwich. This first felt much like gristle, but as he worked it carefully with his tongue the consistency seemed more like paper. When Curley stumped down the hall to get his tobacco, Charley withdrew the paper from the ham and found it was a note, damp, but not too badly mauled.

Take it easy and keep awake.

Charley dropped it into his boot top and tried to figure it out. Since Henry Dodge had free access to the jail there would be no need for him to resort to secrecy. How about Pepe? Charley thought that one over carefully, then withheld his judgment. Pepe just might have been able to work a message into that ham somehow, but could he write? And even if he had got that far, what could he do beyond it? But then, Squint had put the sandwich together in the first place, so how about him?

When Curley finished his cigarette it was getting onto dark, and he removed Charley's plate and cup and took them down the hall. In a while the outside door opened and closed and Charley was all alone inside the building.

He lay there a long while. His head ached and pounded and his legs and arms were stiff. It was deep night outside now and the lone oil lamp on the desk in the outer office caused strange-appearing shadows to cavort on the whitewashed plaster walls of the hall outside the cell. A couple of hours went by before he heard the door being opened once again.

He lay quietly and waited with his eyes closed. He heard the steps come toward him lightly and with swiftness. When they paused outside the lattice, the hissing voice coincided with the small sound of the key turning in the lock. Charley opened his eyes and saw Pepe grinning at him.

"Señor Charley, please hurry—there is not much time."

Charley slipped through the door and took the gun which Pepe held out to him. They didn't waste time on words, but went directly down the hall. As they passed outside, Charley became aware of another person standing in the shadows with a shotgun, and he likely would have turned his Colt on this one if Pepe hadn't been quick to grab his arm. It was Squint.

They moved off around the corner of the building and squatted in the shadows before any of it was made clear to him. He was still inclined to blow Squint inside out, but he thought he'd better wait. When they were settled in the dark Squint gave it to him.

"I got Curley in the bar," he said, "and it's locked up now. He come over with your dishes and he hung around to brag up that noose he made for you. I started slippin' him whiskey, and I guess you know how he gets with some of that in him."

"Yes, I think I know." Charley was looking hard at Squint, and he followed with a question of his own. "How come you're doin' this? I thought you had a story all arranged."

Squint rubbed the shotgun barrels with his hand. "A feller says most anything when a gun is on him. Until you come to town, your brother Grat and Casey was the only two who ever paid me any heed—to the rest of them around here I was dirt. And maybe worse. They had me dancin' their tunes any time they chose, and when they fixed that setup in my place to kill Casey they thought they still had me in their hands. I had to wait a bit, that's all."

"Is Riston around where I can get at him?"

"Yeah, he's here in town. He and them two tramps of his are up in Dodge's office. I guess they're gettin' set to cut your canyon place up."

Charley rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "Dodge?"

"Uh-huh. Dodge. I learn things in my place—that's about the only good thing about it. Everyone thinks Dodge and Riston lays off one another 'cause each is big, but that ain't it. Dodge owns Snake lock, stock and branding iron. He just walks soft, that's

all. I learned this all by little bits; it weren't Riston shot Grat, it was Dodge. He just held off long enough to see if that money he lent Grat was goin' to pay off like he'd thought it was. Dodge had respect for Grat's idea about raisin' them black cattle. When he saw how nice it worked he killed Grat and got ready to move in on his investment. Casey was due to be next, but when you showed up that complicated matters. After Dodge missed you on the Felix he and Riston decided to get both you and Casey in one move. That's why Snake killed Casey with your gun."

Charley's mind saw Dodge limping down the hall again; he felt his teeth clamping tight and shocks of pain running along his jaw. "All right, thanks, Squint. I'll be moving now."

"I'll go with you, if I may," Squint said. "It'll be a pleasure. Like I say, Grat was always good to me."

"And I will go, too," Pepe said into the silence. "It is no good if I do not go as well."

CHARLEY moved out from the cover of the building and went along the street, the others trailing. Dodge's upstairs office was half a block away and he could see the shadows of the people up there moving against the windows. He moved quickly.

At the outside stairway he paused and removed his boots, and the others followed suit. The stairwell yawned above them like an empty mine shaft and he had to feel his way with caution. At the top of the steps a small landing stood before the door of Dodge's office.

As soon as Pepe and Squint were next to him he raised the latch and threw his weight against the planking. There must have been a small hook on the other side and the time required to overcome this slight resistance was just enough to give a warning.

There were no preliminaries and the shooting started right away. They understood what the showdown meant and no time was devoted to discussion of the situation. It went fast, but it didn't seem that way to Charley. To him it seemed that all things moved into slow motion.

Charley worked his gun at Dodge. He was aware of Riston firing at him, too, but Henry Dodge was the man he wanted. He held his single-action gun in his right hand and bruised the palm of his left in fanning strokes across the hammer. The gun bucked hard against his hand and the sheet of flame was all one with no breaks as the lead tore from the muzzle across the room and into Dodge's belly.

He saw Dodge's heavy body lean into the torrent as a man leans against the wind. He saw Dodge's gun flicker from his fingers and saw him shake as the bullets turned and lifted him. Dodge's arms and shoulders raised as though he had a hard time breathing. Then he was dead, and falling.

It was quiet suddenly. Charley had been aware of the other shooting, but only in vague and disconnected spasms, but now he saw that they had finished what they had come to do. Squint's shotgun had gathered Riston and one of the wranglers into its fatal embrace and the other had fallen before the fire of Pepe. He considered it a miracle that none of Charley's crew was hurt.

They went downstairs as silently as they had come up. The air was clean and fresh and as they walked toward Squint's saloon Charley thought he'd like to stay outside and breathe it into him; but he needed a drink.

From beneath the bar, Squint produced a bottle of his honest whiskey, and filled three glasses. Then, before he raised his glass he paused, and opened the backroom door—and stood there, staring.

"I'll be damned," he said, and Charley and Pepe bent around his shoulders for a look. "After he was tanked I tied him with that rope of his—the noose around his neck and the other end around his feet and hands. And look at him."

"Plumb strangled himself," Charley said.

Closing the door, they returned to the bar and had a drink, and then another. After two more Charley put his glass down and regarded Squint with admiration.

"With Casey gone, I'll be needin' help. Your underpinnin' healed up yet?"

Squint laughed with his bad eye closed. "A lot of things healed up tonight. There ain't nothin' I can't do."

"Nor me," the young Pepe said loudly. "With this lightning in my belly I can ride straight to the moon. Caramba!"

"It looks to me like you're already on the way," Charley said.

And he gently took the glass from Pepe, and eased the staggering boy into the nearest chair. ✪✪✪

He stepped into the dust, and a block away Korb did the same. . . .

By WILLIAM L. JACKSON

When you're old enough to pack your own gun, then you're old enough to know when it's . . .

TIME TO FIGHT!

NORM BERGER shifted his tall young body in the saddle and sighed; when he really wanted to split the night air with a whoop. The end of roundup's weeks of dust and drudgery called for something like a long yell, but somehow the yell wasn't in Norm now that he had had his look at Two Fork's main street.

There was not a single pony he could recognize tied along the street. This meant that no one was here to celebrate the end of this year's roundup as they had celebrated in past years. It also meant that Norm's older brother, Dan Berger, had been right in the argument they had had before Norm left the ranch.

Dan had watched him dress in his best duds and polish his boots, and then he had

blocked Norm's way in the living room of the ranch house. "I suppose you're going to town to whoop it up and celebrate," Dan said.

"I thought I might ride in for awhile," Norm answered. "Aren't you?"

"No, I'm not," Dan said, "and my guess is that you'll find cow puncher company pretty scarce tonight. It's a different town, Norm. It's a silver town as well as a cattle town, and the two don't seem to mix well."

Norm tilted his best hat on his head and reached for his gun-belt. "I'll see," he said.

"Yes, you will," Dan said. "But you won't see any better with the gun. Why not leave it here and stay out of trouble?"

To this Norm objected angrily, and tempers frayed thin by the steady, grinding weeks of roundup flared between them. Norm's hands were shaking with anger as he walked outside to saddle his horse—but the gun was not on his hip.

Now he looked down the street before him, saw dirty yellow light splashing into the dust from half a dozen saloons, and knew that Norm had been right about the town. Before silver was found in the nearby hills, Two Fork had been a cattle town with one quiet saloon, and a friendly Saturday night poker game had been excitement. A man wore a gun where he pleased then, and a trip to town was no cause for brothers shouting at each other.

In spite of this recognition of change, as he rode up the street Norm thought of the pleasure in a drink and a chance to stretch saddle-weary legs. Both resentment of the change in the town and stubbornness in a desire to prove Dan wrong caused him to turn his horse deliberately into the yellow square of light cast out from a saloon.

Inside, he took his whisky at the bar and casually studied the crowd in the long mirror. At the rear of the room he saw one of the half dozen bar girls leave the table of a short and heavily built man who was sitting alone. She was heavily rouged, but endowed with a natural prettiness and a rounded figure which drew attention from the crowd. She caught Norm's eye in the mirror, shrugged her powdered shoulders, and smiled at his tanned young face.

He thought of no trouble when she came to his elbow at the bar, and he saw no harm in ordering her a drink. She put her hand on his arm, and he saw no harm in that, either. Her face took his mind from footsteps behind him until he heard a hard voice say, "Rose, ain't he a little too horsy for you?"

NORM turned slowly, and now he saw trouble. It was in the hard and bright eyes of the man from the rear of the room. It was in the ramrod stiffness of his back and the blunt hands hooked in his gunbelt. Norm felt the force of sudden silence in the saloon as he said, "Were you referring to me, mister?"

"Yeah, cowpoke." The thickset man's eyes were ugly, bright with pride in a tough reputation and awareness of the crowd's attention. "Why don't you just drift out of here and let Rosa alone?"

The muscles in Norm's back and shoulders tightened. "Why don't you let Rose make up her own mind?" he said. He could feel a quick expectation from the crowd, hear them silently screaming for a fight. He didn't want this, and he suddenly wished Dan could be beside him to straighten this out.

"I said drift," the thickset man said, and his hand came up to shove at Norm's shoulder. But the shoulder was no longer there. Norm half turned, and his fist shot out in a blow which was pure reflex, striking the stranger full in the lips and driving him backward.

Even before he stopped reeling backward, the thickset man made it apparent that he would not fight this way, for his hand flashed to his hip and came up with his gun. Norm braced himself helplessly, until some man in the crowd yelled, "Pete, he's got no gun!"

For another instant the heavyset man's mind stood on dead center, and then his gun lowered. An animal urge still brightened his eyes as he said, "Next time you show your face around here, be wearing one. No man punches Pete Korb around. Stay out of town, or wear your iron!"

Korb's gun made its small motion, and Norm stepped away from the bar. The gun jerked again and he walked out of the saloon, his back stiff, his legs moving woodenly beneath him. He mounted his horse and bent forward to gulp great breaths of air, still feeling the pressure put upon him by that open muzzle.

He rode to the ranch at a gallop, feeling no comfort until he came into the warm light

from the ranch house windows. He put his horse in the barn and hurried to the house. Dan Berger half-turned as Norm burst into the spacious living room whose wide fireplace and hide rugs still breathed the spirit of old Tom Berger, though their father had been buried for five years.

Dan's blue eyes measured him slowly, and he said, "You're pale as a ghost. What's wrong?"

"I had some trouble in town," Norm said. "What do you know about a man named Korb?"

"Pete Korb?" Dan said. "A drifter, another of the ones with no visible means of support. Supposed to have a fast gun, but not a friend in town. Made it known right away how tough he is. You didn't have trouble with *him?*"

"None other," Norm said ruefully. He paused a moment, remembering the fight, and then gave Dan his story.

His brother's weather-browned face grew stormy. "You played the fool," Dan said. "You asked for trouble by stopping in town without another cowman in sight, and you asked for it again by playing cute with a saloon girl. Not just any girl, but the one Pete Korb is sweet on. You had to—"

"All right!" Norm said sharply. "I'm sorry. That doesn't change anything. The question is, what are we going to do now."

"*We* can't do anything," Dan said quietly. "You'll have to do it. He offered you a choice. Either stay out of town or ride in and call his bluff. You could go back tonight."

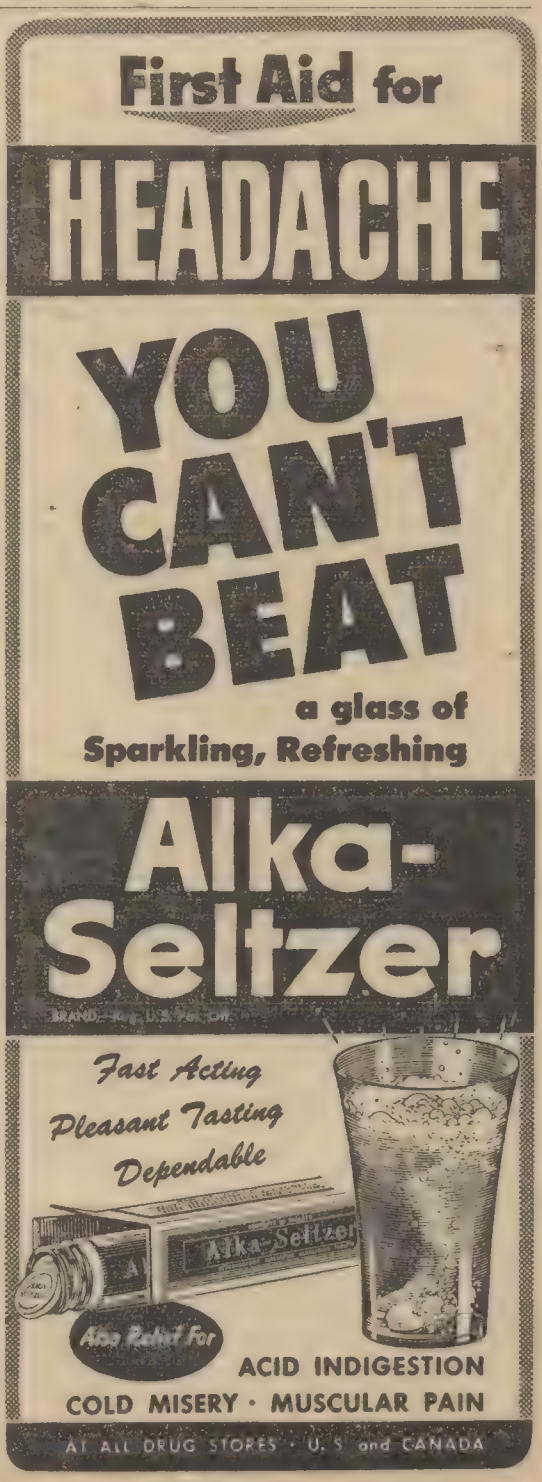
"But," Norm began, and stopped, for he knew that in his place Dan would go back tonight. He averted his eyes and said lamely, "I'm no gunman. He's killed men. You said as much."

"Sure I did!" Dan said. "Do you think I like the spot you're in? You should have thought of that before you hit him. I can't fix it up for you this time. The whole range will know about it by tomorrow. You've got to call him, or you might as well never go back to that town, even after he leaves."

"All right, I'll go back. I'll ride in tomorrow afternoon." Norm looked away from his brother and thought, *And get killed.* He swung away angrily. "I'm going to turn in."

He went upstairs to his room and dropped onto his bed. The full impact of Dan's refusal dropped a numbing fear into his belly. He pushed his head against his pillow, and a helpless bitterness shook him.

Dan was right, of course, but how could he do it alone? Always before it had been the two of them. Always when there had been



real trouble Dan had been there. He had always known that when there was no more he could do Dan would be able to do something. His chest drew tight with an empty, hollow feeling as he realized that there would be no Dan behind him tomorrow. If he lost, Dan would kill Pete Korb, but that would do a dead man little good.

He swore and tossed on his bead, growing quiet only when Dan came up and softly spoke his name at the door. He did not answer, but it was a long time after his brother had gone on down the hall before he actually slept.

IN THE morning he did his chores as usual, but the early sun held no warmth for him, and the cold winds of fear blew in his belly throughout the morning. The innocent dust of the yard became the dust of Two Fork's street, and every step he took was a step down that street toward Pete Korb's fast gun.

The last two hours of the morning he spent cleaning and oiling his gun, and he could eat no lunch. He left Dan at the table and went to rope and saddle a horse. When he rode across the yard, stiff-backed and stiffer faced, Dan stood on the porch and said quietly, "Luck, kid."

He cursed Dan briefly as he traveled along the road, and when he caught himself at this he cursed himself and was quiet. The trip was miles shorter than usual, and the town grew from a haze into reality too fast, seeming to move out to meet him. He saw more men than usual on the street and felt momentarily stronger as he thought, *They're waiting. They knew I'd be in today.*

A loafer scuttled into a saloon down the street, and Norm knew that Korb would soon hear of his coming. He dismounted before the nearest saloon, and as he walked inside he heard men leaving behind him. The bartender came to face him, a slender man with fear pinking his face. Quietly, plaintively, he said, "Please, mister, not in my place."

"No, not in your place," Norm said. "Bring me a glass of water."

He had taken one tasteless sip of water when a slim rag of a man came through the batwing doors. "Korb says he meant what he said last night," the rag-like man said, his eyes hot-bright with an onlooker's lust.

This was part of it, Norm knew, to tell him what an old hand at this Korb was. This was to frighten him, to bring the threat in the back of his mind forward as a fear.

"Go back and tell him I'll be in the street in ten minutes," Norm said.

His water glass was empty when those minutes had passed. The barman took the glass and said, "Luck, friend." Norm nodded and walked out onto the street. He stepped into the dust, and a block away Korb did the same, without another man on the street now.

Dan, Dan, Norm thought. *You don't know what this is like. I didn't think I could do it, and now he may kill me.*

He saw whorls of dust kicked up by Korb's boots, and he saw Korb's body swaying toward him, still too far away for that single motion, that out-of-line wink or twitch which would send their hands downward.

Over Korb's left shoulder was the blacksmith shop. *Remember, Dan, when you let all hell loose that afternoon by dropping a hot nail into the smithy's boot?* On Norm's left was the hotel, where a man need only pick a key from the rack, paying for his room when he could look the proprietor up in the nearest saloon. *Remember that fine night when we slipped upstairs and roped all of the doors together before you yelled a fire alarm? Remember, Dan?*

Korb was fifty feet away now. The gunman's glance skittered sideways and up and down, without seeming to really leave Norm's face. There was that experience in his past which drove him to this caution. He was reading every possibility of the street before him, scanning its buildings and probing into its doorways and windows. His eyes lifted for a testing of the windows in the hotel behind Norm, and then they fixed again on Norm's face.

They closed the distance by four more paces, and then Korb's stride broke, though his gun hand did not move. He swung his head to glance at a row of horses tied before a saloon and nodded, as if to himself. He turned his back upon Norm, and with two quick strides reached the horse he had chosen, one whose foreign brand made Norm realize that it was Korb's own mount.

Before the watching eyes of the town he mounted, without a backward glance or threat at Norm. He turned his horse about, walked him, and then urged him to a trot. Norm was still standing in the street when there was no more Korb in Two Fork.

Norm turned slowly about then, realizing that it was over, and retraced his steps in the street. The rosy-faced bartender fell back from the door of his saloon, grinning, and Norm said, "I think I'll have a drink now."

WHEN he turned his horse out at the ranch he felt as weary as if he had ridden all day, and his legs trembled beneath him as he carried his saddle into the barn. He laid it on the edge of the hay mow, and he stepped upon some object which lay in the straw on the floor.

He bent and picked it up, and he was startled to find that it was a heavy metal key, a hotel room key. He closed his fingers about it and whirled to walk the length of the barn and peer into the few stalls there. Before the last stall he halted, and his nostrils told him this horse had been hard ridden even before he touched the wet flank of Dan's favorite chestnut.

He returned to the front of the barn, and he saw Dan's saddle on the edge of the mow, a rifle still in its boot. It was an old Winchester with a shiny barrel, just the sort of gun a sharp-eyed gunman might see if a man was to stand with it in the rays of sun slanting through a hotel window. Especially if the man holding it wanted him to see it.

As he heard Dan in the door of the barn Norm turned quickly, concealing the key in his hand. "You're back," Dan said cheerfully, "so it must have ended right."

"Yeah," Norm said drily.

There was no falseness in Dan's blue eyes as he said quietly, "I guess you won't be coming to me again when trouble calls."

Norm thought of himself walking down Two Fork's main street, sure that he was alone. "No," he sad, "I guess I won't." And suddenly he understood. He hadn't actually been alone, but in his mind he had, and *that* was what mattered.

He started for the door. "Me for some water," he said. Behind him, unnoticed by his brother, the hotel key fell with a faint chink to the straw-carpeted floor. Dan would be looking for it sooner or later, and there was no sense in making him worry for nothing. ✪ ✪ ✪

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 10)

1. The horses had their tails cut at the end of the season so they could be more readily identified from other stock the next spring.

2. True. A swing team is any span of horses between the leaders and wheel horses in a jerk-line string.

3. A horse is said to be spooky when it has a nervous temperament.

4. True. Old time cowmen believed that by splitting a cow's tail, blackleg could be prevented.

5. A siwash outfit is one that is second-rate, unprogressive, etc.

6. If the ranch boss sent you out for the skewbald horse, you could correctly return with the one having a pattern of white over the reddish-brown base.

7. In the old West, the term, running meat, is used in reference to a buffalo hunt.

8. True. The term "running cattle" means "working cattle."

9. A cowpoke who rolls his own hoop is one who minds his own business.

10. True. The term "roll" is one that is used in connection with roping.

11. The term "put a kid on a horse" generally refers to sending a youngster to relay a message or perform some other errand.

12. If the ranch boss sent you out for a putto, you should return with a wooden stake.

13. If the ranch boss sent you out for a painter, you should go after a panther.

14. The expression "He packs a long rope" is generally used in reference to a rustler.

15. True. The term "mulada" is used in reference to a herd of mules.

16. The Spanish term "*mozo*" means young man or youth. An additional meaning of "assistant" has also grown up in some parts of the West.

17. Used in connection with cattle, the expression "locate" means to keep a watchful eye over cattle on a new range until they are accustomed to it.

18. A "little feller" is simply the operator of a small spread.

19. If you were sent for the "head täster," you should return with the ranch manager.

20. "To heel" means to rope an animal by the hind feet. This is almost never done to horses.

WHERE THE TRAIL DIVIDES

"Drop it, Serge! Drop it quick!"

By FRANCIS H. AMES

THE three of them walked into my room in the Cordilia hotel, Grant Fullbright, Herb Lundeen and Nick Trainor. Grant squatted by the wall, his eyes intent on rolling a smoke. Nick poured himself a drink from the bottle on the table. Herb Lundeen stood flat-footed in the center of the room, nervous-like. And then his

Me and Matt Driscoll had gone to school together, shared blankets, grub and bullets—even sparked the same girl. . . . Now it was time for one of us to face the other over gun-sights.

face hardened as he took the bull by the horns.

"Matt Driscoll's mavericking, Len," he said. "What are you going to do about it?"

There it was, out in the open like the hard face of a mountain. What was I going to do about it. We were all members of the Cordilia Range Association, with pooled outrange at the edge of the badlands. I was the big auger of the outfit. What was I going to do about the mavericking of my best friend?

"Haven't encountered Matt doing any mavericking," I said.

Grant Fullbright cupped his hands as he lit his smoke, spun the match across the room, palmed big hands about an upthrust knee.

"Quit dodgin' around the bush, Len," he said tartly. "You ain't been long on lookin'."

Nick tossed off his drink and set the glass down careful, as though fearful it would break.

"You know the association rules, Len," he said. "We tally the unbranded stuff when we make our gather. We divide equally. There's five of us in this team. There used to be eight, remember?"

I remembered. When the homestead rush hit our country we were caught with our pants at half mast. None of us had over three or four sections of deeded land. Eight of us pooled together and bought up railroad land, droughted out nesters' homesteads, until we controlled the prairie land fronting the badlands.

It was a good deal. Holding the front we held the back country. This wild land of butte and mesa was a mavericker's paradise. Most of the unbranded stuff that we turned up in our gather was our own drifted stock. Some of it might have been from other outfits to the east and west. We turned branded stuff toward their home spreads; we shared alike in the mavericks.

In the five years since the Association had been formed, three of our members had gotten out of line. Slim Rouse had put on more stock than his share. We had warned him, once. When he continued the practice we pooled to buy him out. He didn't like it but according to rules he had no choice. Vic Stern used a running iron and got his just deserts. We ran Hank Billings out for mavericking behind the association range.

"Mavericking on our range, and behind it, contrary to agreement," Nick Trainor said, "is stealing."

"What are you going to do about it?" Lundeen repeated the query.

They were all looking at me now, three men who had been my neighbors for years. But Matt Driscoll had gone to school with me, shared my blankets in the old days when we were thirty-and-found punchers. Matt and me had gone a long way together.

"Any of you boys," my query was caustic, "want to walk up to Matt Driscoll and accuse him of stealing?"

I could see their minds chewing on this one, picturing six-foot, red-headed Matt, with the easy drawl and the hair-triggered temper.

"You ramrod the Association," Lundeen said. "You're the man for the job."

"Reckon I don't see it that way."

Grant Fullbright uncoiled from the floor, a slow moving, ponderous man, moon faced, dark eyed.

"Quit hoo-rawin' us," he snapped, and the eyes darkened with anger. "Talk or fight, you're the only man among us that can handle Matt, and you know it."

His words riled me, but a man don't rise from a two-bit puncher to a power in his neighborhood by going off half-cocked.

"Pull your horns in, Grant," I told him. "In the first place I've no solid, first hand proof that Matt is mavericking. In the second place—"

"In the second place," Grant interrupted disgustedly, "as top man of this outfit you acted pronto against Rouse, Billings and Stern. But when it comes to your lousy, rustling friend, Matt Driscoll, it's a new tune."

"And then," Herb Lundeen said, "there's Ann Butler."

I pivoted to smash at Lundeen. He staggered back against the wall with blood dribbling from his mouth.

"Damn your rotten soul, Lundeen," I howled at him, "keep your tongue off Ann!"

I watched Lundeen's hand, poised over the gun at his hip, seeing the insane anger gather in his face, the birth of the urge to draw.

"Don't be a fool, Lundeen," Nick Trainor's voice was high and shrill. "Keep your hand away from that gun. Len'll kill you."

"Back off, Len," Grant Fullbright snapped. "Use your heads—both of you!"

"To hell with you," I said, moving out of the room and down the dark stairs to the street.

IT'S A HELL of a deal when a man's best friend lets him down. It is a knife twisted in a man's heart. I hadn't seen Matt mavericking, but I knew that he was. I hadn't seen because I hadn't looked; my punchers had looked. Not looking gave me a cheap, guilty feeling. Mad all through, I moved from the Cordilia out on to the dusty, sunburned street. There was the patter of hastening feet behind me.

"Len—oh, Len Walker!"

I turned, seeing Ann Butler moving toward me, small and utterly desirable, with that breathless, urgent quality about her that made a man hunger to kiss her, stroke her soft, darkly auburn hair.

"I've been waiting for you to come down, Len," she said, coming close. "The meeting was about Matt, wasn't it?"

And there you had it, all wrapped up in a neat package. A year back I'd have been able to sit on the corral fence and talk to Matt, friend to friend. A year ago neither of us had yet noted that Ann Butler had changed from the skinny kid we'd gone to school with, to a woman with a promise in her eyes for the right man. We each figured on being the right man.

A year back Matt Driscoll didn't give a whoop over the fact that I ran more stock than he did, had a new house on my place, instead of the two-roomed shack that he called home. Not caring, he wouldn't have tried to make the money to build one by gambling with Serge Sickert, and failing there, mavericking cattle.

Taking action against Matt Driscoll as head of our Association was one thing, doing it as his rival for Ann's hand was another. It meant lead flying and some one's death, and I knew it.

"About Matt!" I exclaimed to Ann. "What gave you that idea, kid?"

"Don't try to lie to me, Len," she said. "You're not good at it. What do they want you to do, fight your best friend?"

"What would you want me to do, Ann. What do you expect me to do?"

She turned her head away and she bit her lips. She was a cattleman's daughter and she knew the score. But she was a woman. She turned to grab my arms, shake me.

"Don't do it, Len," she cried. "Don't let them talk you into doing it. They're all afraid of Matt. If you don't move against him no one will."

A man gets a stiff jolt when he sees a woman that he worships turn against right and duty. He finds himself not wanting to see, not wanting to believe. It was worse than looking at myself and calling "skunk." Ann Butler and I were riding the same saddle.

"Keep your nose clean, Ann. Keep out of this!"

"You keep out of Matt Driscoll's business," she told me, her eyes afire. "Fight him, Len, and I'll never speak to you again!"

That left a man a lot of leeway. The street was hazy with heat waves as I left her and went down the boardwalk. In Art Grofort's joint the eyes of rancher, nester, cow hand and business man moved over me and then moved away. Serge Sickert was standing at the bar with a drink in his beefy hand.

I stepped over to him and slapped the drink so hard that the glass shattered against the back-bar, grabbed his shoulder and spun him around, put the flat of my hand on his face and pushed him back against the bar. Then I slugged him in the nose with my fist.

He whimpered like a whipped pup when I gathered his vest front in a pucker and took him out into the back alley. I set him up and hit him again, knocking him over the garbage cans with a clatter of tin.

"Gamble with Matt Driscoll again, Serge," I said, "and I'll kill you. I'll blow your money-grubbing soul out through the back of your skull."

Walking away from him, down the alley, something warned me. Drawing on the turn I caught him with a derringer half drawn. I could have killed him before the muzzle of the hideout gun cleared his vest.

"Drop it, Serge! Drop it, quick!"

He dropped it. I went back and picked it up, tossed it into the air, blew it over the board fence with a blast of lead. The kick of the forty-four was a solid, comforting thing, the scent of powder a heady power in the air.

Folks were craning their necks on the street as I went to the livery for my horse, wondering what the shooting had been about, looking at Len Walker, the man who did his duty only when duty suited him. I knew

what they'd say if I tackled Matt, and what they'd say if I didn't. The last would be the lesser evil of the two. Running Matt out of the country, or killing him, would be a good way to get rid of a rival for Ann Butler's affections.

Riding down the street I saw Lundeen and Fullbright and Trainor, standing on the boardwalk. I pulled up before them and unloaded.

"I'm resigning from the Association," I said. "I'm all through. Give me time to pull my beef and ship them out. We'll start rounding up in the morning."

"So," Herb Lundeen's breath whistled in his throat. "You're a damned quitter, Walker. Maybe you're in cahoots with Driscoll. Maybe you're mavericking, too."

"You got more guts than sense, Herb," Fullbright stepped between us, placing his broad back before Lundeen's body. "Get out of town, Len, until you cool off."

From the saddle I looked down at Lundeen.

"The next time we meet, Lundeen," I told him, "I'll take a public apology or I'll kill you."

I RODE out between the stock yards and the elevator, across the creek bridge, scenting the odor of alkali water and tule reeds. A muskrat's wake moved across the pond below, with the tail wobble behind. Memory came back, sweet and strong, of Matt Driscoll and me sneaking down creek at dawn, tending our traps, breathless with kids' eagerness as we inspected each set for the treasure it might bring. Muskrat hides had bought our first guns, the hulls for never-ending practice. There was no man on the Cordilia range who could hold a candle to Matt Driscoll with a gun, unless that man was myself.

News has an uncanny way of traveling in range country. When my punchers came in that evening they knew of what had occurred in town. You could tell it by the side glances they gave one another, and me. They knew that when I resigned from the Association that the Bar-W would have hardly enough deeded range for a hundred head. The boys knew that they would soon be out of jobs, and they knew why.

When a man starts going down in the eyes of his crew he gets as low as the belly of a road runner. At chow even Ching Lee, the Chinese cook, carried his thin lips in a straight, disapproving line. I ate at a silent table, shoved back my plate and gave it to them.

"We'll start gathering in the morning off Association range. I'm shipping out early."

"How about stock cars?" Bill Gifford, my ramrod, inquired.

"I'll ride to Cordilia in the morning and wire for them," I said.

"There'll be about a hundred head—" Gifford's eyes were bland—"of three-year-old steers."

"We're shipping," I said distinctly, "everything that will sell for beef in Chicago, cows, steers, young she stuff. Gather and the cars will be there."

They looked as though they'd been slapped in the face with a dead coyote. Slim Yates choked on his grub and his Adam's apple ran up and down his neck. Yellow Smith dropped his fork with a clatter, scrambled beneath the table for it, cursing softly. I went to bed.

Lying there, I thought about Matt Driscoll. In mind's eye I could see him sharply in the darkness, with all his strengths and weaknesses. Any way you laid them they added up to a lot of man. Matt was tall, quick-moving, red-headed as sunset, blue-eyed, drawly-talking, with a slow smile that widened to a grin that made you want to toss a comradely arm about his brawny shoulders.

Down through the years every move, every mannerism that made up the whole were as familiar to me as sun-burned prairie and the wind in the sage. Matt Driscoll was a part of my life. And so was Ann Butler. Without either I'd just as soon give the spread away and ride for Mexico.

I was still tossing, half-awake, when Ching Lee rang the breakfast triangle. Washing up at the bench on the porch, moving with the boys into the dining room, hearing the trampling of hoofs in the corral, added up to a lot of living that I was going to miss. When I went down to saddle a horse I could hear Bill Gifford's terse orders.

"We'll work from west to east," Gifford told the three men.

"Hell," Tuffy Camp exploded, "we can't gather six hundred head with four men. Half the stuff will stampede into mavericker's paradise."

"We'll do the best we can," Bill told him.

"The boss will take a hand when he gets back from Cordilia."

"Why didn't he order cars last night?" Slim growled.

"Too busy," Camp remarked, and his laugh was low and unpleasant, "shining up to Ann Butler and dodging a ruckus with Matt Driscoll."

"What's Driscoll got that we haven't?" Yellow Smith complained.

"A fast gun hand," Gifford growled. "Shut up and get a rope on that bronc."

I sneaked out of my own spread with my tail low. It gave me a bad feeling, believe me. I wouldn't give two hoots in the hot place for a crew that wouldn't grouse and grumble on occasion. But this was different—a lot different.

In Cordilia I told Cash Holder at the Milwaukee station, "Rush those cars by wire. My crew's gathering now."

"What are you shipping," Cash complained, looking at my order, "the whole damned layout?"

"What business is it of yours?" I flashed back at him. "Rattle your key and get those cars on the move."

Cash's mouth hung ajar.

"Godamighty," he stuttered as I walked away, "who's been sawing on your horns, Len?"

A mile out of town a rider topped the hill, mounted on a high stepping blue dun. I knew the horse and the rider. There wasn't time to avoid meeting Matt Driscoll. He came on and hauled up.

"Long time no see," he said, cocking one long leg around the horn, flipping out his Bull Durham. He rolled the smoke deftly with his long, slender fingers, ran his tongue down the paper, twisted the ends and struck a light on his buttock.

"What you been up to, Len, to keep out of jail?"

"I beat up Serge Sickert in town yesterday," I said.

"No harm in that," he said, and the slow grin touched his lips, spread over his tanned face, wrinkled the skin about his eyes. "What's he been doing to you? Hooking you at poker?"

"No," I said bluntly. "He's been hooking you."

I saw the smile leave, saw the quickening of anger.

"I kill my own cats, Len," he said harshly. "Don't horn into my business. I'm warning you."

"If you needed money," I said, "why didn't you come to me?"

He swung the blue dun against my roan.

"What the devil do you mean by that, Walker?"

He hadn't called me by my last name before in his life. So much for friendship.

"Serge cleaned you," I said, "and when he cleaned you he raised hell and lit a chunk under it."

"It ain't no hair off your chest."

"Maybe not," I told him, "and then again maybe it is. Live and learn."

I rode off before he could draw in his breath to reply. Topping the ridge I could see him sitting his bronc, looking after me as though he had half a mind to set the hooks and take up my trail. The clear air of distance set off the cocky hunching of his shoulders, the slant of his jaw as the anger built up and began to smoulder. There was a trickle of icy fear angling up my spine as I set the roan down grade and put the hill between us.

A MAN'S mind is a peculiar arrangement. He controls one side of it but he don't have no pucker strings on the other. My part of the deal said that I could do as I damned pleased. Riding along I got to thinking about Matt, riding into town, with the three members of the Association prowling around with their claws out. Feeling for Matt pulled at my throat. I turned my bronc around and rode for Cordilia.

With the roan ground hitched out of sight in the alley I stood at the corner of the bank, looking down the street. There were two nester's wagons before the mercantile, a dog hoisting his leg on a wheel, the night's jack rabbit tracks in the dust, Matt's blue dun before Art Grofort's saloon.

Fullbright, Lundeen and Trainor were walking up the way from the hotel, close bunched. They halted at the blue dun, put their heads together, moved toward the bat wings. I ran down the alley, eased in the back way of Groffert's joint, stood there among the mops and the brooms in the narrow entry hall, keeping even my breathing still, wondering what good it would do me to be there. It was a queer feeling, not having any idea of what you were planning to do, for I'm a gent that usually figures my

toss before the loop is shaken out. Through the partly open curtain that hung at the end of the narrow passageway I saw Matt at the bar, the three ranchers enter to take a table facing the room.

A trio of damned fools!

"Driscoll," Herb said, real loud, "come over here and talk."

Driscoll turned around. He stood with his back to the bar, a glass in one hand, the other hanging loosely. He burned the three of them with his eyes.

"I hear," Matt said distinctly, "that Walker has been horning into my business. What part of it do you three figure to shove your beaks into?"

You could have heard a pin drop.

"You know the Association rules," Lundeen said. He got to his feet and laid his palms flat on the table. "We're buying you out, Driscoll. Name your price and we'll pay it and let it go at that."

You might as well ask a man to name his favorite rat poison and down it. Bought out of the Association range Matt was out of the cattle business, the same as I would be. Only there would be a difference. I'd be out for cowardice, or other things a man might name. Matt would be branded a thief.

"Name your charges," Matt said, as cold as ice.

Lundeen's long, homely face was the color of an alkali soaphole, a dirty white, with all the blood drained from it. He knew that when he named Matt Driscoll thief that he was going to have to draw. I saw him ease his weight on to his left hand on the table, away from his right, and I knew that he was going to take the chance.

Right then I knew what my subconscious mind had been nagging me about. I could cut my own throat from ear to ear if I wanted to drip gore, but that wasn't all of it. I couldn't let Herb Lundeen stand up and die for me. I took a quick step into the room.

"Hold it, Lundeen! I'll handle this."

Matt turned his head to look at me, and it seemed that his big ears flattened against his skull like a cougar's.

"I've been expecting you to horn in," he said.

"It's sell out or get shoved out, Matt," I told him.

"Name your charges," he said. "I'd admire to see if you've got the guts."

HERB LUNDEEN and I had swapped places. It was the same deal as it had been before I came into the room, only I was on the receiving end. Name Matt Driscoll thief and die. I knew the man and I knew the wicked, concealed temper of him when aroused. Matt was ready to go. I didn't name him thief.

I started to cuss him, using all the rough, so familiar words that we had for so long used against each other from kids to manhood, words that had been used so many times with a smile.

"You long, drawn out, fire-topped garter-snake," I roared. "You lizard-hipped, double-gaited son of a sheepherder. Since when did you get the idea in your thick skull that you could ride me down? Uncross your brains, you wobble-kneed, long-geared, slop-eyed, two-bit puncher. You know the damned rules. If there's any fairness in you you'll sit down like a man and palaver. Art, bring us a round of drinks."

I turned my back on him and went to the table, hauled out a chair and sat down. I could hear the wind whistle out of Herb Lundeen's gullet as he sagged down into his seat. Matt walked across the room, twirled a chair and sat down in it backward.

"Listen," he said to me. "I aim to shoot your topknot off. No half-oiled, creaky-jointed, hook-billed buzzard off of the Bar W is going to shove me around. Now what's in your craw?"

"When a man's wrong, he's wrong, Matt," I said. "He can't prove he's right by killing his friends—not unless he's primed to kill off the whole damned universe. We won't name it, but you're dead wrong and there's no use in shouting it to the house tops. Without telling, you know it. Now how much do you want for your spread—your price and we'll try to meet it. I hear that they have a right pretty climate in New Mexico."

Matt looked at me squarely then. I saw the naked anger that lay in his face, and then I saw it fade away to be replaced by something stronger and deeper. I saw the shock come to him when he realized that this was the end of the road, and what its ending meant to him. Behind his eyes there laid the naked misery, the deep sense of shame, the sincere regret. Then he smiled.

"I always did hanker," he said, "to see New Mexico. I've heard it's a good place for

(Please continue on page 108)

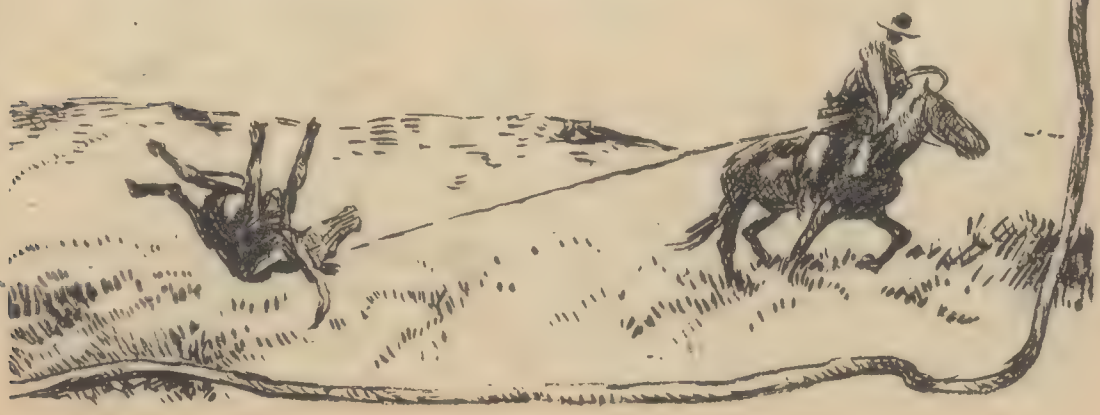
GENTLE ART

By S. OMAR BARKER

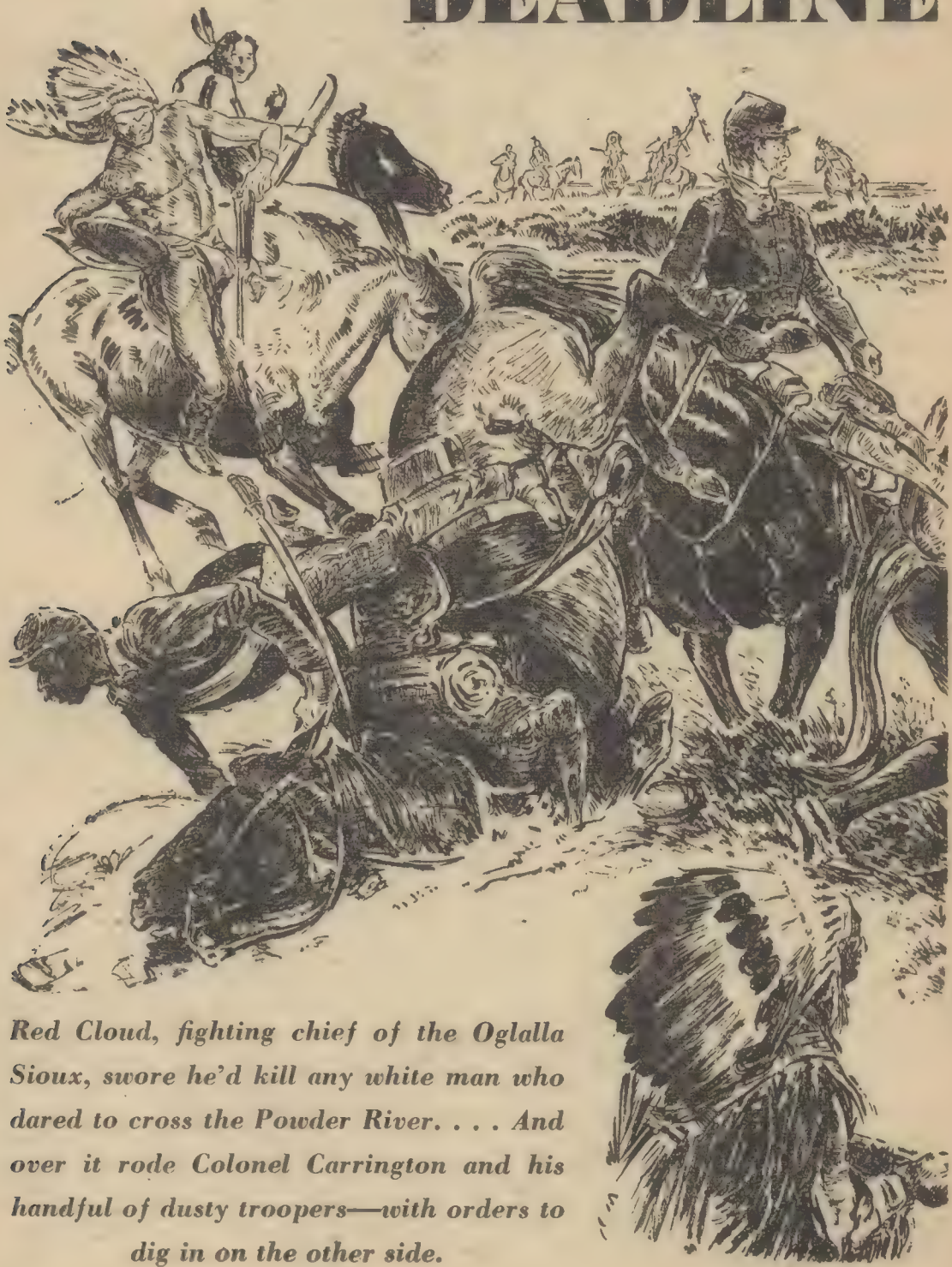
When cowpokes straddle their cowhosses,
They let them know just who the boss is,
But that don't mean they will abuse 'em.
They ride with spurs, but when they use 'em,
It's mostly with a gentle touch
That don't hurt any hoss too much.
For good cowhosses understand
The cowboy's heel as well as hand.

OF SPURRIN'

It helps advise them what comes next,
And what their ridin' man expects
Of them by way of speed and action.
Rough giggin' causes bad distraction
From cow work, and it just ain't bright
To use spurs any way but light
Upon a hoss purt near as smart
As you are. Yep, the art
Of spurrin' right, out in the West,
Shows up the cowboy at his best,
And roundup bosses don't prefer
A man that draws blood with his spur!



POWDER RIVER DEADLINE



Red Cloud, fighting chief of the Oglalla Sioux, swore he'd kill any white man who dared to cross the Powder River. . . . And over it rode Colonel Carrington and his handful of dusty troopers—with orders to dig in on the other side.

By WILLIAM BENDER, Jr.

Thrilling Factual Story

Fetterman was completely cut off.

"It will take another Phil Kearny massacre before the government will understand that only an overwhelming force can end this savage frontier war."

George Armstrong Custer,
Brig. General, U. S. Army

CHAPTER ONE

Bozeman's Trail

WHEN the seven hundred men of the 18th Infantry left Fort Laramie, the last outpost of civilization, on Sunday, June 17, 1866, they moved northward into the heart of a country controlled by three hostile tribes. The Cheyennes, the Arapahoe and the angry Sioux had flung a blunt, grim warning but three days earlier: *Any white man hereafter found on Bozeman's Trail beyond Powder River would be killed.*

Within six months, the ruthless fulfillment of that challenge would be well known. By then the 18th would have fought fifty-one bloody skirmishes. They would have seen the picked men of five companies chopped to death in a massacre and would have learned that the feathery whisper of an arrow could spell death as surely as the shattering blast of shrapnel on the cold battlefields of the Civil War.

And, when the time came that they could hold out no longer, they would have seen a lone civilian scout make a prodigious midwinter ride through the entire Indian nation to get reinforcements from a garrison two hundred and thirty-six miles away.

Finally, and most tragically, the few survivors were to see their sacrifices and hard-won experiences ignored for nearly ten years until a second great massacre completed the awakening of a hapless government to the savage war being fought beyond the frontier.

In 1866, the shortest trail to the Montana gold-fields was the one blazed some three years before by John Bozeman. It was also the most dangerous.

For Bozeman's Trail cut off from the travel-worn Oregon Trail near the bend of the North Platte in the present State of Wyoming. From that point it arrowed across the high plains directly to the gold-fields. In so doing, it sliced through *Absaraka,* the Land Of The Crows, which had long since been conquered and held by the powerful Sioux.

With past experience to guide them, the Sioux wanted no white men within the rich hunting grounds of the Powder River country. Tired of being forced to shift from place to place by the encroachments of the whites, the Sioux decided to use, if necessary, all the force at their disposal to keep *Absaraka* for their own.

When the first emigrant trains began creaking up Bozeman's route, the alarmed Sioux ravaged them and left the bones of the travelers to bleach on the trail as a warning to those who might wish to follow.

The U.S. Department of Interior, upset by the violence of the attacks and their own inability to keep the gold-crazed emigrants on safer trails, set out to make treaties. By being lavish with their gifts, they hoped to gain the right to peaceful use of the wagon-road. They held out such lures as blankets, beads, sweets, guns, powder and knives until finally, down from his northern refuge came one of the Sioux's most powerful malcontents, Red Cloud, Chief of the Oglalla.

Meanwhile, the War Department had been working independently on the problem of "protecting" the Bozeman Trail. Back in headquarters at St. Louis, Generals Dodge and Pope had been receiving reports from the frontier and had decided two things; one, that the Sioux would not make peace and, two, that Red Cloud could muster only five hundred lodges of the Sioux with which to defend *Absaraka.*

On that basis, they determined the number of troops needed to successfully oppose the enemy and sketched a rough plan for the building of three permanent forts beyond Powder River.

THE 18th Regiment of Infantry arrived at Fort Laramie on June thirteenth. In command was Colonel, Brevet Brigadier General Henry Beebee Carrington, a gaunt cautious and methodical man who had quit a pre-war law practice in Ohio to serve the Union.

To his surprise, the peace conference called by the Department of Interior was in progress and the fort was swarming with bonnetted tribesmen from the northern territories. And Carrington, in turn, dumbfounded the peace commissioners when he bluntly announced his intentions before the assembly: He was going up the Bozeman Trail to build three forts.

This was the chance Red Cloud had awaited. All stoicism gone, he rose before the chiefs and spoke. His voice was forceful and his logic painfully clear to every listener. The government had asked for peace, yet had sent soldiers to make war. The government had asked to buy the right to travel the Bozeman, but had sent a White Eagle—Colonel Carrington—to steal that very road from the Sioux. Therefore, the government could not be trusted.

The Sioux, he said, would no longer have dealings with such people and would return to their hunting grounds where they wished to be left alone. Since White Eagle had been straightforward in announcing his purpose, Red Cloud would be equally frank: Whomsoever ventured beyond Powder River would be killed.

There was more, much more. No such challenge could be given without a long reci-

tal of the bravery, prowess and accomplishments of the tribe; their skill with lance and tomahawk, their countless coups and their determination to die in defense of their hunting grounds.

When their men returned from the conference, the squaws had the travoises ready for travelling. By sundown the Oglallas had vanished into the north and the twilight lay heavy and ominous over the plains.

WHEN the 18th broke camp on Sunday for the long march north, Carrington had obtained a considerable number of riding horses for his men, a sizable herd of beef cattle and the services of civilian teamsters, wagon-masters and contractors for the work ahead. But even more important, he had hired Jim Bridger and several other frontier scouts to accompany the expedition.

Bridger, old and graying, had spent a lifetime on the plains and mountains. He became watchdog, navigator, interpreter, counselor and father-confessor for the regiment. For the first time in his life, he encountered in Carrington a man who would listen to and heed advice, a condition which must have surprised Old Jim no end.

"Advice," he had once said, "is something people try after they have tried everything else."

The first advice he had to offer was an old axiom of the frontiersmen, "When you don't see Injuns, that's the time to look out!"

The 18th took it to heart and moved warily up the Platte Valley, onto the high plains beyond and past the Cheyenne River. Scouts were ever alert to prevent ambush by day and vigilant sentries patrolled the bivouacs at night.

For over a week the regiment marched steadily over the sterile, droughty plains until, on the twenty-eighth, one of the scouts waved from a hillcrest dead ahead and his shrill call braced the hot and tired men: "Powder River!"

Here then was the spot for the first fort. As an intended defiance to Red Cloud, Colonel Carrington commenced building it on the far bank of the stream—the Indians' side.

They had their first sight of the hostiles the very next morning. A band of Sioux came helling out of a dry wash, swooped down toward the regulars and veered off. With them went the best part of the sutler's horse herd.

A detail was quickly mounted and sent off in pursuit. They returned twenty-four hours later after an abortive seventy-mile chase and they had one ironic prize—an Indian pony laden with presents distributed by the Department of Interior at the recent peace conference.

The work at Fort Reno—as the first fort had been named—was progressing favorably by the ninth, so Carrington moved his main force northward to begin the second fort. After scouting various possibilities, he came to Piney Forks and there decided to build the main post along Bozeman's Trail, Fort Phil Kearny. Ominously, the day was Friday, the thirteenth of July.

The decision was one which could have chilled the phlegm of the most hardened Indian fighter. Piney Creek flowed from the Big Horn mountains to the Powder and was the geographic center of the Sioux hunting grounds, the sanctity of which was inviolable according to Red Cloud's ultimatum.

The new fort had hardly been staked out when word arrived off the plains that the Cheyennes wished to come in for a conference. Their need was urgent.

Two Moons and Dull Knife headed the delegation which arrived on the sixteenth, and their plea was anxious.

The Sioux, they said, were very angry because the soldiers were building a fort in this place and they were going to make trouble. The Cheyennes wished peace, but they were afraid the Sioux would make them go to war if the soldiers did not go away.

Time was very short. Every day the soldiers remained drove the game further away. The Sioux were holding war dances in their villages. Scalping parties were on the loose and the young men were very eager for the war to start. The soldiers must leave at once.

Carrington's answer was that of an army officer subject to orders he could neither amend nor ignore: The regiment was at Piney Forks and at Piney Forks it would stay.

The next day Private Livensberger of F company was killed by a Sioux arrow, the first casualty of the campaign. Four other soldiers were wounded and one more died before sundown. Six trappers gathered in the cabin of French Pete Gazzous, a squaw man who had lived nearby for years, were found scalped where the Sioux had left them. One of the dead men was Pete himself.

The war had started, and in earnest.

AT THE end of the week there was an event serious enough to deserve a name of its own: The Crazy Woman Fight.

Twenty-six officers, men and wives were halfway between Reno and Kearny when they spotted a buffalo herd on the approaches to Crazy Woman Creek. Lieutenants Daniels and Templeton separated from the column to make a kill.

The wagon train was rolling down the dry, sandy bed of a wash when staccato gunfire ruptured the stillness. A flight of arrows spattered among them.

Seconds later, Lieutenant Templeton galloped wildly up the wash. He was bleeding about the face and a Sioux arrow flopped grotesquely in his back.

"They killed Daniels," he screamed. "My God, *Indians!* They wasn't buffalo."

Realizing that the sluggish sands made the creek bed a death trap, the caravan made a dash for a nearby hill where they could have command of the situation while mustering their frightened wits.

They corralled the wagons, scratched out some hasty rifle pits and hid the women while they tried to anticipate the attack.

When it came, it was a complete surprise. A shower of arrows arced from a hidden ravine and caused three more casualties.

Water had now become a grim problem. The wounded needed it badly and the uninjured had been forced to extraordinary exertions under the blazing desert sun and were sucking pebbles to relieve their parched throats. The creek, some distance away, beckoned to them tantalizingly.

That was the situation when an event took place that was retold in barrack-rooms for months thereafter. One of the surrounded men, the Reverend David White, a Methodist minister and new chaplain of the 18th, became aware that the cloth had been humiliated in a most tangible and heathenish manner.

White had been in a rifle pit on the opposite side of the corral from the ravine in which the red archers had just let loose their volley. With his attention focussed in the wrong direction, he had not seen the danger until a spent arrow wounded him.

Through surprise and necessity, the Reverend White came to his feet screaming imprecations at the heathen. He grabbed a bemused soldier, one Private Fuller, and told him to follow the banner of the Lord with him, White, the standard bearer.

Completely furious at the indignity he had suffered, White broke across the corral, leaped the rifle pits and set out to convert the Sioux . . . with Fuller right behind him.

A rapid burst of pistol fire came from somewhere in the ravine just after the two leaped into it. Some very excited Indians erupted from the far side of the cut and shed feathers to the breeze as they raced for the nearby hills.

The Reverend David White who, like his namesake, had vanquished this Goliath, returned to the corral and snapped out the information that he and Fuller had cleaned out the ravine as far as the creek and had killed two Indians in the process. Fuller had gone down after water. The dignity of the church had been upheld.

But the fight was still on and the odds were frightening. The Sioux had brought almost seven hundred braves onto the field. Their wild tactics and giddy paint, the shrill noise of eagle-bone battle whistles and the constant yammer of war-whoops bewildered the troopers.

The next foray was made by mounted warriors who screamed up to the corral at furious speed. Swinging onto the off sides of their horses, they would fire into the soldiers as they thundered by, give a triumphant whoop, and be gone.

They came in from every direction, each one firing an arrow or rifle and affording the besieged men little target at which to aim a retaliating fire. And they killed Sergeant Terrel this time and wounded three other men seriously.

The group was in dire condition. The corral was spattered with blood. They had more wounded than they could take care of and the women had come out of protection to help those that had been hit. Water was again critical and ammunition had been burned down to a dangerous level.

As the day began to wane, those in the corral that were still rational saw a spiral of dust rising from the north and suspected the Indians had called in reinforcements.

They quickly made plans to kill the wounded, the women, and finally themselves, should a large scale attack develop.

It was in a deepening twilight and a sick, hopeless frame of mind, that they saw a

horseman sizing up their position and they raised their hot rifles for what might be the last time.

"Hold your fire," called the rider. "I'm coming over."

The battered men of the caravan were apprehensive. "Who are you?"

"Jim Bridger."

Bridger had been riding point, about two miles in the lead of a strong force from Fort Phil Kearny. Earlier in the day, the old scout had read Indian signs telling of a proposed ambush at Crazy Woman Creek and the patrol had been looking for trouble. But the Indians had vanished silently into the night.

CHAPTER TWO

The Wolf Howls

AS THE work on Phil Kearny progressed, the garrison was noticeably weakened when two companies were detached and sent up to the Big Horn river to establish the third fort.

Anxious conferences were held to discuss the surprising appearance of Indians in such strong numbers. Until the Crazy Woman fight, Colonel Carrington had assumed the "five hundred lodges" figure set up by headquarters had been accurate. But the force that Red Cloud had employed at the recent battle entirely refuted that estimate.

The frontiersmen and scouts recalled the background of the present uprising and as they did so the military became aware that a critical blunder had been made in sizing up their opposition.

Two years ago, Colorado militia had attacked a peaceful village of Southern Cheyennes at a place called Sand Creek and had brutally massacred squaws and children in the assault.

In retaliation, the Cheyennes sacked the town of Julesburg and then sought refuge in *Absaraka,* bringing tales of the white men's faithlessness.

Within the year, two other equally incomprehensible events occurred in which the Cheyennes were the chief sufferers. Two tribesmen were imprisoned at Fort Laramie for keeping one Mrs. Eubanks, a white woman, in slavery. The Indians, Two Face and Blackfoot, protested that they had purchased the woman from another tribe—a procedure not at all uncommon at the time.

But the Cheyennes were hung without more than a drumhead trial and the story swept across the hills to fan the wrath smouldering around the council fires in the north.

The final indignity came when the Brule tribe was ordered to move a few hundred miles into Nebraska. The peaceful Brules had been receiving government rations at Fort Laramie until someone determined it would be more economical to bring the Indians closer to the source of their provisions. When they were told where they were going, the Brules revolted. Nebraska was Pawnee country and the Brule and Pawnee were deadly enemies. So they too joined the confederation forming in the Big Horns.

Meanwhile, the Arapahoes—both Northern and Southern tribes—were talked into joining the Sioux in a war against the white invaders so that, instead of the five hundred lodges Carrington had been told to expect, he found himself faced with an estimated three thousand warriors.

Red Cloud's leadership had done something no white man had thought possible. He had brought the Sioux, the Cheyennes and the Arapahoes into a concerted war against their common enemy.

In the fortnight following July 15th, twenty-nine men died between Fort Reno and Fort Phil Kearny.

On July thirtieth, the following message was sent south by courier:

> Fort Phil Kearny, D.T., Piney Forks.
> My eight companies of 80 effective men each . . . do not give me a fixed adequate command for the present emergency . . . I ought to have some cavalry or Indian auxiliaries at each fort.
>
> Carrington, Colonel Commndg.

The evasive answer arrived in due time and it read:

> From the War Dept. to HQ Mountain Division, relayed to HQ, Fort Phil Kearny, D.T., Piney Forks:
> If the supply of troops are insufficient to protect Bozeman's route to Montana, the abandonment of Fort C. F. Smith might be considered.

From the viewpoint of Washington and St. Louis, that should have been sufficient. And anyhow they did not have to bring in the dead that were found each day along the

bloody 67 miles between Forts Reno and Phil Kearny.

Meanwhile, rumblings of the war on the high plains reached the East and Frank Leslie's *Weekly* sent their correspondent, Grover, to cover the events on the Bozeman Trail.

Tuesday evening, August seventh, Mr. Grover strolled out of Fort Kearny, his mind probably on local color and the flaming beauty of the setting sun. At dusk they found his body, scalped and still bleeding, a few short yards from the stockade.

The week of the twelfth, three emigrant trains bound for Montana were attacked just north of Fort Reno and their stock run off by the Indians. On Monday of that week, Fort Kearny quivered under a triple blow. One of the hay contractors was killed, two hundred and nine cattle were driven off and the horse herd was stampeded despite the defenses of the garrison. Tuesday, another assault made on the remaining cattle was repulsed.

The following Monday, a man was killed and another wounded in an emigrant train camped within a mile of the fort. Wednesday, the Indians made a third attempt on the fort's beef cattle. But this time Captain Frederick H. Brown, the Quartermaster, headed a quickly mounted detail that galloped out and killed thirteen of the red men —all within sight of the fort.

Two days later, Mr. Grull, a contractor, and two of his men were killed just before reaching Fort Phil Kearny.

Carrington realized he was facing some thing much too large for his puny force to handle and imbued his men with the concept that their only chance of safety lay in completing the fort

THE harassing attacks eased up considerably with the coming of September, for that was the time the Sioux must start their Autumn hunt, and the men at Phil Kearny, glad of the respite, worked frantically against time to complete their fort.

A constant stream of lumber poured in from the logging operations on a pine-heavy island a few miles up the creek. Saw mills just outside the limits of the fort were going constantly. And as the pungent wood was sawed and planed and hammered into stockades, barracks, block-houses and stables, the fort came into being.

The outer stockade, eight feet high, protected 480,000 square feet of interior given to barracks, officers' and non-coms' quarters, parade ground, stores, a chapel, bakery and hospital. Attached to this and protected by another stockade was the main stable yard and quarters for the teamsters, wagon-masters and other civilian employees.

Carrington found his work cut out for him. He was his own engineer and draughtsman, he supervised the supply lines that had borne the brunt of the first phase of the Indian attacks, he established a courier service to carry regular dispatches to and from the telegraph line on the Oregon Trail, he checked constantly on the building activities, inspected the pickets and sentries and, whenever he had the time, sent off letters to headquarters asking for all those things that would be needed to run an efficient campaign —troops, cavalry and modern guns.

The army had acquired the Spencer carbine within the last year or so and had found it an excellent weapon. The Spencer fired a brass cartridge which permitted much more rapid fire than the old muskets. There had been promises of course, but so far the 18th was still armed with the regulation Civil War Springfield from which a good soldier could fire about two rounds per minute.

Carrington also wanted horses. Whether or not the winter campaign which had been broached by headquarters should finally be ordered, horses were needed for the effective pursuit of the Indians, who had already dared to commit depredations right under the shadow of the stockade.

Wednesday, October thirty-first, was a big day at Fort Phil Kearny. Though men, arms and horses had not appeared, the payroll had arrived from Fort Laramie and new uniforms for the frontier army had just come in.

The colonel made a stirring speech. Reverend White, the fighting chaplain, offered a prayer, the flag-raising was held, the band played and the wives and children of the personnel witnessed the formal dedication of this new outpost of the United States Army.

But at sundown, cautious eyes looked down from the hills and carefully marked the taunting flag that stood out firmly in the breeze chilling in from the Big Horns. And as these scouts turned to leave, the inquisitive wind reached up to ruffle their warbonnets and fondle the ermine tails braided into long, black hair.

The Sioux were coming back from the hunt.

IN THE days which followed, the Indians were ominously quiet. Wagon trains and couriers moved between Reno and Kearny without sign of the hostiles. And only the wood detail encountered danger. Several deaths occurred when individuals walked away from the protecting guards which always accompanied the loggers. From time to time, the soldiers would kill a too-anxious Sioux or Cheyenne who had closed in for a coup.

But Fort Phil Kearny, conceived in blood no longer recoiled at isolated killings.

As November wore on, the nights were so monotonously quiet that wolves came down from the mountains to feed on the scraps which the butchers tossed out the mill gate.

Then one night a wolf howled outside the stockade . . . and the sound echoed. It was answered by others on Sullivant Hill. Those echoed too. A scout woke Carrington, bade him listen, and gave him one succinct bit of information: "A wolf call doesn't echo . . . *if* it's made by a wolf!"

Red Cloud's first strategy had been sage but ineffective. His attempts to starve out and demobilize the garrison by driving off the livestock had almost worked. Now he would be counseling with his chiefs to arrive at a more effective plan. What that plan would be was anybody's guess, but fate was playing into the hands of the leader of the Oglalla Sioux.

In mid-November, officer-replacements reached Fort Phil Kearny. Among them was one Captain, Brevet Lt. Colonel William Jud Fetterman, a sparsely-bearded, handsome gentleman whose greatest fault was his impatience. With him he brought stories current outside the frontier that the Phil Kearny garrison was doing too much building and too little fighting.

He agitated among the officers for the right of the military to carry the war to the Indians without waiting for the Indians to bring it to them. He found at least one agreeable ear: Quartermaster Captain Brown who even then was expecting orders removing him to a desk job back at headquarters and who was anxious for one more good fight.

Carrington, however, was determined to sit tight. Even though Fetterman might be unaware of the fact, the Colonel knew all too well that an aggressive campaign was impossible until the fort received those long-overdue supplies and fresh horses. Particularly horses. Indian attacks, stampedes and hard riding had so whittled down the herd that Carrington could no longer mount more than a third of his troops.

December came, the air grew crisp and the ground, for those who could read it, bore increasing signs of Indians. The second tactic was planned and ready.

Red Cloud tipped his hand on the first Thursday of the month. An attack was made on the wood train out near Piney Island. The initial attacking force was small but inflicted several casualties before the relief column could gallop out from the fort.

Captains Fetterman and Brown and Lieutenants Bingham and Grummond were in the relieving force. They dashed after the retreating Sioux, Brown working deadly havoc with a repeating rifle he had managed to obtain. The chase led toward Lodge Trail Ridge and the fighting split up into several small engagements.

A second supporting force, personally led by the Colonel, arrived fresh on the scene prepared to swing the battle in favor of the whites. But Carrington got a sudden lucky insight into the Sioux tactics. The attack, he learned, had started out with some fifty Indians. Already over two hundred were on the field and dust clouds rising from the canyons indicated more on the way. Quickly, he ordered an assembly, bringing his scattered command together on the floor of the valley.

Only two of them could not respond. Lieutenant Bingham was dead and a Sergeant Bowers was completely paralyzed from a tomahawk blow that had split open his head. He died where he had fallen on the trampled ground before an ambulance could arrive. When they recovered their dead, the troops cautiously withdrew to the fort.

That same night, with the command safely inside the stockade, Carrington announced his conception of the newest Indian tactics.

Red Cloud was trying to lure the soldiers into ambushes. Once the garrison could be sufficiently weakened, the Sioux would probably finish it off in a single, overpowering attack.

Today they had almost succeeded in massacring a hundred men.

This was the time for the utmost caution. With winter coming on, the chance for reinforcements before Spring had passed. The new guns had not arrived and, with snow clogging the Bozeman Trail, the wagons would carry nothing but essential provisions until the March chinook once more cleared the road.

Bridger had gone back to Fort Laramie to spend the winter, and his sagacious guidance was lost to the garrison. The other scouts, however, could and did give good advice. Particularly the man known as Portugee Phillips, a gruff, stocky, heavily-bearded frontiersman who was not too popular around the fort because of a persistent rumor that he had once killed a man down on the Oregon Trail.

Phillips lived by himself in a little cabin built just outside Phil Kearny's main gate, and this caused the further criticism of unsociability.

At the conference in Carrington's office, Phillips claimed that by avoiding a pitched battle the whites would accomplish two things: First, they would not risk crippling losses which would make the fort itself subject to attack and, secondly, the absence of a good fight might have a strong effect within the Indian ranks. With no chance for scalps or brave demonstrations, the warriors might grow bored with the campaign. Once they did, Red Cloud's forces would dissolve.

With the exception of two captains, all agreed that this would be the only course open to them if they hoped to live through the winter. The two, Fetterman and Brown, offered comments about any army which would not fight, but their desire for action were ruled down by the rest of the staff.

As the meeting broke up, Fetterman made his parting shot: "Give me eighty men and I'll ride through the whole Sioux nation!"

CHAPTER THREE

Phillips' Ride

DURING the second week of December, Red Cloud launched a new series of harassing actions—night attacks. Campfires sparkled in the hills at night as Indian reinforcements joined the siege. And the lack of action bought them down at night to fire arrows at the sentries patrolling the high, creaking banquettes.

Several times Carrington ordered howitzers trundled out to fire case shot into the darkness in attempts to discourage the snipers. One night a skillful cannoneer fired a round which burst directly into a campfire on the ridge across the creek and after that the garrison noticed that the Sioux kept their camps further from the fort.

Sunday, the sixteenth, came and it seemed the Sioux were somehow juggling their forces. On the nineteenth, the wood train was attacked but the guard drove off the warriors before much damage was done. Oddly, the Indians retreated willingly.

The wood train was attacked again on the twenty-first, and this time the picket stationed on Pilot Hill signaled that the guard was having difficulty. The Indians were becoming more obstinate.

Carrington quickly assembled the garrison and told off a force to go to the relief of the train. Fetterman insisted on leading the troops and, not to be outdone, Quartermaster Captain Brown, whose orders to report to St. Louis had arrived, buckled on his pistol and joined the expedition. Lieutenant Grummond was in charge of the twenty-seven mounted men, the only ones for whom horses were avai[illegible]

Their orders were strict: "Bring back the wood train. Do not ride beyond Lodge Trail Ridge. Beware of an ambush."

But in Captain Fetterman's eye there glowed the lust for a big fight. If he happened to count the men in his detachment, he must have had an inspiration. . . . There were exactly eighty.

They found the wood train being fired on by nearly fifty Indians, and these began a stumbling, awkward retreat back into the hills when Fetterman appeared in the valley. The wood party was started back to the fort. The Indians were just beyond rifle range and seemed to be having difficulty. If they should have wounded with them, it might be easy to catch them and wipe out the whole bunch. Fetterman saw his thoughts echoed in Captain Brown's eyes. If nothing more, he owed Brown this one last fight.

"Let's get them!"

The column pointed to the north and stretched out after the Sioux. Excitement became evident in the Indian mob and convinced Fetterman that he would be able to engage them.

He urged his men along faster and faster. The lead was narrowing perceptively. They came abreast of Lodge Trail Ridge. The Indians were only a few hundred yards up the valley ahead.

They passed the ridge. Now was the time for the crushing, triumphant blow. The trumpeter bugled the charge, and Grummond's cavalry surged forward, sabres flashing in the brilliant sun.

Two coppery horsemen, sitting motionless atop Peno Head, studied the scene with minute care. When the blue column had gone far enough up the valley, Red Cloud, the elder of the two, unrolled a blanket and exultantly waved it above his head.

A wild ululation sprang up from the land below. Sioux and Cheyennes and Arapahoes flowed from the hidden valleys and crevices, from behind hillocks and stands of brush and when Fetterman looked back, the land he had just crossed was alive with a howling, painted terror. He was completely cut off.

BACK at the fort, time passed anxiously...then frighteningly. The ragged sounds of two volleys had drifted back from the Lodge Trail Ridge. After that, sporadic firing began but dwindled rapidly. And then there was silence. A long, tense silence which gradually became pregnant with meaning.

Captain Ten Eyck and a handful of soldiers went out on reconnaissance and found the Indians in strength. He reported that it looked like a complete massacre and asked for more men so he could push on to the scene.

Carrington, momentarily unable to grasp the significance of the fight, replied by message: *Forty well-armed men with 3,000 rounds, ambulances etc., left before your courier came in. You must unite with Fetterman. Fire slowly, and keep men in hand.*

Mrs. Grummond—who was soon to have a baby—noted in her memoirs that all the women were gethered together that evening, *...speechless from absolute stagnation and terror. Then the crunching of wagon wheels startled us to our feet. The gates opened. Wagons were slowly driven within...carrying forty-nine lifeless bodies to the hospital.*

Lieutenant Grummond and the others were not brought back until the next day. Until then they slept where the scalpers had left them. Fetterman and his eighty men never lived to ride through the Sioux nation.

That night the prisoners were released from the guard house and armed. The band, cooks and bakers were given muskets and assigned duties for the immediate defense of the fort. And with all these, Carrington could muster only a little over two hundred men.

Ten Eyck had reported some three thousands Indians swarming about the hills.

The howitzers were loaded and fused for immediate use in case Red Cloud should storm the walls. Fort Phil Kearny was tottering. A clearing was made in the powder

He'd sold his pardner down the river . . . for the Muleshoe ranch. What more could even the Muleshoe ask?

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magazine so the women and children could be hustled in and destroyed if fighting started within the stockade.

All the old hopes for reinforcements, the Spencer guns and the horses, came up to haunt Carrington as he sought vainly for some way to preserve his fort.

The temperature had been steadily falling and at sundown the thin, sharp flakes that precede a blizzard filtered out of the icy sky.

This was the dramatic moment that should have been filled by a popular hero whose name would hence be inscribed along with the silversmith, Paul Revere, and the runner of Marathon. Aid was imperative. But the only volunteer was the gruff, narrow-eyed man whom few people liked—John "Portugee" Phillips. Dressed in his buckskins and buffalo coat, he came awkwardly to Mrs. Grummond's room that night.

"I am going to Fort Laramie for help," he mumbled. "I'm going for your sake.... Here is my wolf robe. I brought it for you to keep and remember me by if you never see me again."

His words were unpoetic and his manner so surprisingly selfless that Frances Grummond momentarily forget her grief.

Phillips slipped out of the Fort Kearny gate that Friday night, December 21st, leading his choice of the garrison's few remaining horses—the colonel's thoroughbred black Pockets crammed with crackers and meat-biscuit, a satchel of grain slung over the saddle horn, he left with the Godspeeds of the entire command.

The blizzard had grown to furious proportions and the mercury had skidded far below zero. As the night wore on the storm became frenzied. The sergeant of the guard was forced to alternate his sentries every twenty minutes when he found the men numb and frost-bitten after short exposure to the icy blasts howling over the stockades.

Snow drifted against the walls and the wind blew the bark from the weathered pine Details were set to work shoveling snow from the stockade as a precaution against a sudden assault coming right up and over the frozen white ramps.

Yet somewhere out in the hoary wastes, buffeted by the full fury of storm, a man rode alone headed blindly for the south and the telegraph line on the Oregon Trail.

Even if he lived through the killing cold, the Indians were out along the whole road and their driving purpose was to keep Fort Kearny isolated until it could be destroyed.

All night he rode and at sunup hid himself and his horse, out in the wasteland. Under cover of darkness, he set out again with only his instinct to guide him. He dare not go near the trail.

The storm abated so he could make better time, but the hazards of snow-leveled washes and arroyos and crusted streams were risks that came with the greater speed.

He rode all day Sunday and Sunday night. On the twenty-fourth, groggy and stiff with cold, he reached the Platte River and the Oregon Trail only to find that the operator at Horseshoe Creek Station could not send his vital message. There was some trouble with the line.

Phillips was as wary as a wounded, dying animal. His senses and his feelings had been blown out of him during the two hundred miles he had travelled across the high plains and his mind was fixed on a single goal. He stumbled from the telegraph station—out again into the biting cold and the wind. He mounted and was on his way...thirty-six more miles to Fort Laramie.

THERE were high festivities at Fort Laramie that night and Old Bedlam, the blustering social center of the post, was packed with roisterers. It was Christmas Eve and the hall was hung with mountain pine and juniper for even here on the frontier celebration was in order. An enlisted men's orchestra was scratching out some merry dance tunes.

Suddenly the door flew open, letting in the cold . . . and a horrible apparition. The man leaned weakly against the jamb, unable to move further into the room. His beard was white with ice, his face pasty from the cold, his eyes dulled with utter exhaustion.

The commanding officer hurried to him and Portugee Phillips, who had ridden two hundred thirty-six miles through Indians, blizzards and sub-zero weather, croaked, "Massacre!" He handed over Carrington's message and collapsed.

Fort Phil Kearny, D.T., December 21, 1866.
(By courier to Fort Laramie)
Do send me reinforcements forthwith . . .
I have had a fight today unexampled in Indian warfare . . . I have recovered forty-nine bodies

(Please continue on page 109)

EYE FOR AN EYE

By JOHN McGREEVEY

Deuces was on the prowl —lookin' for Trigger....

***I near laughed myself sick when Tombstone's toughest hombres ducked when they heard Trigger Thomas was heading in. And then I found out he was looking for* me!**

SO YOU think it's funny, me bein' the first optometrist in the toughest town the West ever knew? That strikes you as bein' a good joke on me, does it? Optometrists just aren't in the same class with gamblers and gunfighters and such.

Well, it might interest you to know that this particular optometrist saved the life of

the deadliest gunfighter Tombstone ever saw. Thought that'd stop you. How, you're askin' yourself, could a timid little feller that fits glasses on other people's noses save the life of a real gunman? If you're of a mind to listen, I'm of a mind to tell you.

I'd just been set up in practice in Tombstone about three months when the word came from Lordsburg that Trigger Thomas was on his way. Now, if President Cleveland had announced he aimed to make our fair city his winter capital, there couldn't have been more fuss and excitement. All the professional gunmen checked their hardware every hour on the hour. The one's that were the worst shots, started talkin' even louder; and the one's that were the best shots got even quieter than usual.

Barney Devlin, who was managin' the Oriental at the time, stored away all the breakable crystal that he usually kept displayed on the back bar. Joe Bignon at The Birdcage had the door to the dressin' rooms re-inforced with galvanized iron, hopin' that maybe it'd be bulletproof. And Rickets Corcoran who owned the General Store had such a run on ammunition that he had to send to Tucson for fresh supplies.

Who was this feller that could cause such a stir in a tough boomtown? Trigger Thomas was the fastest gunman the West ever knew. That's right. I said the fastest . . . and believe me, if any of the men that tried to draw against Trigger had lived to testify, they'd have backed me up.

Fast—why that man made lightning seem slow. Compared to Trigger Thomas, a hummingbird is deliberate. His gun hand could have paced a rattler. Once Trigger Thomas reached for his gun in those days, you might just as well fold your hands and get set to say "Howdy" to St. Peter.

Even the men who hated him the most—and that was quite a crowd—had to admit that Trigger was sure-death with a gun. Dodge City, Abilene, El Paso—he'd been every place; and, every place he'd been there were markers to his good gun eye—markers in cemeteries, that is.

But this feller was as fair as he was fast. He never started trouble, the legend goes. Just finished it.

Knowin' the man, you can understand why Tombstone was flurried. A celebrity was comin' to town.

The one feller in Tombstone that took Trigger's impendin' arrival with the greatest show of Apache-indifference, was Deuces O'Rourke. Of course, the appearance of Trigger Thomas on the scene was goin' to mean either the beginnin' of a new life for Deuces—or a permanent residence in Boothill.

Deuces was the top gunfighter in Tombstone, and he knew that when Trigger moved in, it would be prove yourself or get out. Naturally, a man named O'Rourke has got a sizeable bloc of pride, so Deuces wasn't much in the mood to get out.

All the tinhorns were havin' a heyday placin' book on Deuces. Odds were about three to one against him on the day that Trigger Thomas finally rode into Tombstone.

Bein' an important feller, he came in quietly, on a big, old, flea-bitten mare that didn't look as if she could raise herself past a slow walk. You had to know Western horses to see that underneath that shaggy hide was a dynamo that wouldn't tire no matter how hard Trigger pushed her.

Like I said, Trigger Thomas came into town quiet, but by the time he'd looped the reins around the hitchin' post in front of the Can-Can, near everyone in Tombstone knew the big moment had come. It was almost like the whole town looked up, recognized Trigger, and held its breath.

HE WAS a tallish man, was Trigger Thomas, and sort of stoop-shouldered. His thin face was wrinkled and weathered, and his slouch hat set well back on a mop of thick black hair. His clothes were worn and faded-lookin', and his boots were scuffed and shabby. The only thing about his getup that really took your eye was those guns. They looked so big and heavy hangin' on his hips that you wondered how so slight a man could carry 'em, much less draw 'em with the speed of light.

He moved away from his horse and sort of looked around, expectant-like, as if he thought he might see somebody he knew. Then, after a minute, when he seemed satisfied that there was no one loiterin' around, he squared himself and sauntered into the Can-Can.

What? How do I know all this? Well, for the durned good reason that I was watchin' him from my office window. Not much happened on Allen Street that went by me. I had a ringside seat for every brawl that

started in the Can-Can, Crystal Palace or Oriental.

Fellers that were in the Can-Can that day told me later that Trigger sort of eased his way to the bar, one hand restin' ever so lightly on his gun. There wasn't a man in there who didn't wish he hadn't worn his guns; but Trigger wasn't lookin' for trouble. All he wanted was a drink and a little information. He got both pronto.

From the Can-Can, he went to the Russ House and made arrangements to stay the night. Then, he strolled through the town—down Toughnut Street—past the new courthouse—up Third Street—and, finally, back down Allen past the Can-Can, the Crystal Palace, and the Oriental.

Then's when I got the turn of my young life! Trigger Thomas came in front of my office, stopped and peered in!

There was I, peerin' out at *him* and he catches me in the act! I thought at the time that it was only the fact that I wasn't wearin' a gun that saved my life.

Somehow, I guess I managed a sick kind of grin, though I don't recollect too much about it. Trigger, he gave a little nod and sauntered on.

Seein' him so close-like, I had a different notion about him. His eyes didn't look mean and hard as I thought they would. They were almost kind, and sort of vague. In that split second, I had the feelin' that Trigger Thomas was a man I could like.

I didn't waste too much thought on it, however, for I had two fittin's soon after—one a mighty curvy blonde from the show at The Birdcage. What with one thing and another, I pushed Trigger Thomas plumb out of my mind, thinkin' as I did that I'd never see him again.

I was wrong.

Just gettin' started as I was, I had to cut every corner I could. I had to save every penny and I wasn't exactly swamped with orders. Spectacles in those days was regarded with suspicion at best. So, I slept in a little room in the back of my office.

That day, I was worn out, so when I got back from supper, I didn't waste any time crawlin' into my bunk. Besides, I had a hunch the next day was likely to be a busy one in Tombstone and I was young enough and foolish enough not to want to miss any of the goin's-on.

When the knockin' woke me, I was dreamin' that somehow I'd got myself betwixt Trigger Thomas and Deuces O'Rourke just as they were drawin' on each other. I was so relieved to be awake that I was most to the door before it struck me that this was a peculiar time of night for a customer to be rappin'.

If I had any idea of ignorin' the summons, I soon discarded it, however, for my visitor made it plain he was prepared to keep hammerin' till mornin'. It was let him in or buy a new door.

I guess I should have been more surprised than I was when I opened the door and saw Trigger Thomas standin' on my steps.

I was caught off-guard to the point of singin' out: "Trigger Thomas!"

"Shhhh!" says he to me, lookin' this way and that. "Let me in."

Since I could see the lights from the Can-Can across the street twinklin' on his guns, I didn't feel in the mood to supply much resistance. I let him in.

He closed the office door behind him and I staggered across the room, runnin' into my charts, gropin' for the lamp and some matches.

"Don't light that lamp until you've pulled these shades," he says in a whisper.

By then, I was too far gone to ask any questions. I bumped my way to the big window that fronted on Allen Street and pulled down the shade. Then, I went back to my desk and lighted the lamp.

Trigger Thomas was still standin' not too far from the door when I turned around. It calmed me a mite to notice that he was durned near as nervous as I was.

"Took me a spell to find you," he said, after a minute, "but I finally did."

I guess about that time, I must have give a little groan and looked like I was goin' to faint, because he stepped toward me and in a kindly voice said, "Mister, I need your help, and I'm willin' to pay for it."

NOW, that just didn't make any sense at all. Trigger Thomas, the best gunfighter in the West—the undertaker's best friend—standin' in my office, tellin' me he needed help. If I hadn't been scared I'd lose all my control, I think I'd have laughed.

But Trigger soon made me see it was no laughin' matter.

"Hard to believe, ain't it?" he went on. "Trigger Thomas needin' specs. But it's the

truth. My eyes has been gettin' weaker for the last three years. I knew it, but what I do? Admit I couldn't see and end up on the floor of some saloon with lead in my lungs?"

"N—no!" I stammered, and leaned against a chair for support.

He took off his hat and mopped his forehead with his sleeve. "I've been hidin' out for the last six months, hopin' I wouldn't be forced into a draw. I know the way my eyes are now, I wouldn't stand a chance. What's the good of bein' the fastest man in the West if you can't see what you're shootin' at?"

He had a point there. "But that bein' the case," I said, "why did you come to Tombstone? The town's full of hopefuls that'd like nothin' better than a chance to drop Trigger Thomas."

He nodded. "I know. But I heard you were here. It's not easy to get fitted for specs in this part of the world. I figured it was worth the risk."

I was feelin' sorry for this big feller by now. "And after you get glasses," I said, "you mean to stay on and try to keep your reputation?"

"No. If you can fix me up on the quiet, and I can get out of Tombstone 'thout one of these gunmen findin' me out, I figure to head for 'Frisco. No one'll know me up there, I can settle down." Trigger was lookin' very directly at me, and I could see that he was hopin' against hope that he hadn't made a mistake in trustin' his secret to me.

I heard myself sayin': "There's a fella here named O'Rourke—Deuces O'Rourke. He's got his heart set on swappin' lead with you. If he knew you'd come to my office tonight . . ." my voice sort of trailed away as I pictured Deuces' reactions.

Trigger smiled. "He won't know . . . because there's no one to tell him, but you and me."

"And how do you know you can trust me?" I asked. "There's a lot of money out in this town . . . and most of it against Deuces. Knowin' what I know, I could back O'Rourke and make a real killin'."

The laughter filled the little office. "If you were the sort to Judas a man like that," Trigger said, "you wouldn't be tellin' me about it. I hope you fit glasses better than you pull a double-cross."

I swallowed heavy, grinned, and motioned him into my testin' chair.

My hands were tremblin' some at first, but as I seen that Trigger was bent on bein' friendly, I relaxed some and by the time I finished the examination, we were chattin' like old friends.

He was absolutely right when he said he needed specs. Trigger Thomas had one of the best cases of astigmatic myopia ever I found.

When he saw I was finished, he heisted himself out of the chair and sauntered over toward the door. "When," he asked, "do you figure to have them specs ready for me?"

Knowin' how much every minute meant to him, I promised to try and have 'em ready late the next day.

That suited him fine. He figured he could keep out of Deuces' way for that long.

He had his hand on the doorknob, when he turned back and said as how he'd better pay me, since when we met the next time he might be in somethin' of a hurry.

I quoted him a price, and he insisted on addin' ten dollars to it. "Look," I told him, feelin' very cocky by then, "you don't have to pay for my silence. I gave you my word."

That tickled him and he shook my hand again. "I know," he said, "but I just want you to have the money."

Havin' satisfied my pride, I took the extra ten.

We made arrangements for me to meet Trigger at dusk the next day near the old O. K. Corral. I figured most everyone would be havin' their suppers at that time and there'd be the least chance of our meetin' bein' noticed.

That bein' settled, I blew out the lamp and Trigger slipped through the door and into the night.

As you'd expect, I didn't do much sleepin' the rest of that night, an early the next mornin', I was up and at work on those glasses. It wasn't an easy prescription to fill, and as I worked on it, I began to wonder if I could have 'em ready for Trigger as I promised.

LONG about noon, I saw Deuces O'Rourke walkin' oh-so-careful down Allen Street. He was measurin' each step he took, and his eyes were the only thing alive in his face. There was no mistakin' that look! Deuces was on the prowl—lookin' for Trigger. A shiver shook me as I pictured what'd happen to Trigger if he met up with Deuces now. I worked a little faster.

I didn't stop to eat a proper lunch. Didn't dare to take the time. More and more it started to seem as though Trigger Thomas' life was in my hands; every second I lost in finishin' his glasses was narrowin' his chances for escape.

I wondered where he was hidin' out—how he was managin' to keep out of Deuces' way. Not a very amusin' picture: A man like Trigger sneak around, tryin' to avoid a two-bit gunman like O'Rourke.

Hours ticked by as I worked, feverishly grindin' the lenses. Three o'clock. Four. Five. I was goin' to be able to meet my promised deadline. The spectacles were set in their wire frames. The job was done.

Holdin' those glasses in my hands, I could see a whole new life startin' for Trigger. When he slipped on those specs, the gunfighter would be a myth, a legend . . . and he'd be just another soft-spoken, respectable-lookin' gent.

That pleased feelin' didn't last long, for it was then I heard the men yellin', and seen the crowd arunnin'. Even before I went to the door and shouted my question at Rickets Corcoran, I knew the answer.

"Trigger Thomas and Deuces O'Rourke have met up at the Crystal Palace!"

And there it was. The pay-off. Seemed as if I'd finished the specs a mite too late—unless Trigger might like to wear 'em on his last trip to Boothill.

I was dead certain he hadn't a prayer of a chance against O'Rourke. Without those glasses, Trigger was the same as shootin' blind. He might outdraw Deuces, might even wound him, but he couldn't win.

And he'd never back down. I knew that. There wasn't anything that could save him.

Even if Deuces knew that the gunfighter was nearsighted, that wouldn't stop him. It might make his victory a mite hollow, but he'd still drop Trigger.

And I couldn't run into the Crystal Palace and hand Trigger his new glasses. The humiliation would have killed him quicker than O'Rourke's bullets.

I stared down at the specs in my hands. There ought to be some way . . . some way to save Trigger for this new life that he wanted.

And it came to me! The best idea ever I had. Never had a better one in the almost sixty years since. It was so downright simple.

Even as it come to me, I was scoopin up the paraphernalia I needed, and was high-tailin' it out of my office and over to the Crystal Palace.

There was a big crowd outside the saloon. All the folks wanted to be on hand when these two gunfighters finally took each others measure.

Shovin' and elbowin' my way through that crowd, I was prayin' all the time that I got to them before it happened. Any second, I expect to hear the guns roar and know that I'd had my big idea a little too late.

But I made it. When I shoved the last

He was a different Clayt Winston now from the helpless clodhopper they'd burned out three years before. For now he was willing to pay for his land and his woman in the kind of coin that talked loud in that bloody country—hot lead!

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"THAT COLT-SLINGING CLODHOPPER!"

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By Thomas Thompson

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onlooker out of the way, the two men were standin' at bar's length from each other . . . Trigger at the far end . . . Deuces nearest the door.

It was awful quiet in the Crystal Palace, though there were more people standin' around than I'd ever seen in there before.

Trigger had a sort of sad smile on his face, and he was lookin' in the general direction of Deuces. Anyone with an ounce of trainin' could have seen he was so nearsighted as to be plumb helpless.

Deuces was in more of a crouch. His face was white, and the fingers of his right hand were twitchin' sort of nervous-like, not six inches from his gun.

"I said this is my bar," Deuces snarled, as I moved in closer, "and I don't allow just any one to drink here."

A little shushin' noise went through the crowd. Deuces was bolder than most of us had thought.

"I didn't realize," Trigger answered in that soft, easy, way "that the Crystal Palace had changed management."

"One of the new rules of the house," sneered Deuces, "is no has-been gunfighters allowed." The nervous fingers twitched toward the gun-handle. That should do it.

Trigger straightened a little, and it seemed to me I heard him sigh. I knew it was then or never.

I SHOUTED, "The glasses are finished, Mr. O'Rourke," and walked up to Deuces, wavin' a pair of spectacles at him. "I thought you might want to put 'em on before you draw on Mr. Thomas."

It seemed an eternity that Deuces O'Rourke looked at me and there wasn't a sound in the whole bar except his breathin' and mine. When he spoke at last, it was if each word he said came with a conscious effort: "Did you say *glasses?*"

Again, I waved the spectacles so everyone in the bar could see 'em plain.

"For me!" He roared.

I nodded. "I figured you'd want to be able to see good before you traded shots with Trigger Thomas."

There was murder in his eyes and it was *my* blood he was seein', I knew, but I stood my ground, the terrible spectacles held out to him.

Later, somebody said a woman started it. Where it began didn't matter. The point was, somebody giggled . . . and then, somebody snickered, and somebody else laughed out loud. In about twenty seconds, the Crystal Palace was rockin' with the sound of everybody laughin' . . . laughin' at the picture of me offerin' the fearless gunfighter Deuces O'Rourke his spectacles so he could see to kill Trigger Thomas.

That laughter is the only thing that saved my hide. If that woman, bless her, hadn't giggled, Deuces would have shot me on the spot.

"Well," Trigger said when the laughin' quieted a mite, "I wouldn't want to draw against a man with a—" he gestured toward the specs—"with a handicap. There might be hard feelin's after." And, with that, he tossed a coin on the bar and walked out.

Deuces stood there glarin' around like he wanted to cut the throat of every man that laughed, but there was too much noise for anybody to take him serious.

"Why did you say a thing like that to me?" he hissed, knockin' the glasses out of my hand. "I never ordered no specs from you . . . and you know it."

I backed up a little, looked as innocent as I knew how and said: "My gracious, Mr. O'Rourke—I *am* sorry. I didn't wear *my* glasses and I guess I had the wrong man."

That set the crowd off again, and in the melee that followed, I slipped away.

That evenin', when I met Trigger at the O.K. Corral, he wrung my hand until I didn't think there could be an unbroken bone in it.

"I'm never goin' to forget this afternoon," he said, "and if there's ever a time I can help you, just let me know."

"Sure," I said. "Sure. And if the glasses give you any trouble, drop me a line. A satisfied customer is my best advertisement."

He slipped the specs on and stood grinnin' there in the half-dark. "Don't look much like a gunfighter now, do I?"

"You look fine," I said. "Just fine."

He shook my hand again, jumped on that flea-bitten mare and struck out West.

I never saw Trigger Thomas again, though rumor came to Tombstone that he was doin' well up in San Francisco—makin' quite a name for himself in the importin' business.

See him or not, I never forgot him. No, sir. Practicin' optometrist for more'n fifty years, and that's the worst case of astigmatic myopia ever I treated. ✪✪✪

By FOSTER-HARRIS

Ben Ward's hand moved . . . and death was staring Kiernan squarely in the face. . . .

A DEAD MAN SITS IN

It was no chore for Kiernan to kill the kid. . . . But he wasn't counting on the fabulous Ben Ward picking up the youngster's cards, to play out a dead man's hand. . . .

THERE was something terrible in that pounding music. It brought cold shudders to the spine, and made one think of the stare of dead, sightless eyes and the stench of rotting flesh. Even the hard-bitten plainsmen who had fought Indians twisted uneasily as they recognized what it was.

It was the Comanche death chant. A man had died on the sawdust-strewn floor of John Kiernan's Oasis Saloon just minutes before. Or rather, it had been a boy. Fresh off the Texas trail, he had dared question the raw way John Kiernan had stopped his streak of luck. Over at the battered piano, now, Crazy Tom Smith was pounding out a mad, ghastly requiem.

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Through the swinging doors of the Oasis came a tall man in black broadcloth, to pause an instant, staring about the big room. He might almost have been a minister, except for his chill eyes and his long, white fingers which proclaimed him unmistakably as a gambler. He moved over to the bar, signalling for a drink.

"I'm looking for a man, sir," he told the barkeeper pleasantly. "A red-headed youngster from the Rafter A trail outfit, answering to the name of Billy Scott. He's supposed to be in town. Do you happen to know him?"

For a moment, the bartender was silent His tiny eyes retreated into sullen, pouchy lids, and he glanced at the deserted table over by the piano. When he did reply, it was with a guarded question.

"Mister, ain't I seen you before, back in Caldwell? Ain't you Ben Ward?"

"I am." The tall gambler nodded courteously. His was a noted name in many and many a wild trail-town such as this. Face graven, he waited.

"Just a minute." The barkeep twisted irritably, to bellow at the pianist. "You, Tom! Stop that damn caterwaulin'! Play purty, you hear!" He swung back, his glance now sullenly respectful. "Was this Scott a friend of yours, Mister Ward?"

"Never saw him in my life." Ben Ward shook his head. "Bill Timmons just asked me to give him a message, if I found him."

"Oh." A flicker of relief went across the barkeep's hard face.

The twisted wreck of a man at the piano was obediently playing something pretty now —some maudlin, dance tune.

The barkeep's thick mouth curved in a surly grin. "Did you say Scott? I reckon you'll find him right across the street, Mister Ward. Yeah, in Buryin' Jim Mordan's."

"He's dead, then?" The gambler's voice didn't change a particle, but, somehow, it wiped the grin off the barkeep's face. Ward turned slowly, looking at that table over by the piano. Beside it was a spot where fresh sawdust had been piled thick. "In here, eh, tonight?" he said. "Who did it?"

"Aw, the shorthorn got hard when his luck didn't last in Kiernan's game." The barkeep shrugged coldly. "It was self defense, plain as day. But Kiernan's over at the marshal's office anyhow, seein' about it."

Ben Ward said nothing. Finishing his drink, he laid down a coin and turned away. There were cards still scattered across that table by the piano, and beside it an overturned chair—Scott's, perhaps. Ward went over, righted the chair and sat down, mechanically gathering the cards up.

So Billy Scott was dead. Knowing Kiernan, Ward could imagine just about how much self defense there had been to it—just about none. And the message Ward had been asked to deliver. . . .

"Ben, if you meet up with Billy anywheres, tell him we been lookin' fer him two days," old Bill Timmons, trail boss, had instructed anxiously. "The herd's sold up the trail to Wyoming, and we can't tarry no longer. You tell him the message for him come jest about an hour after he drawed his pay and quit."

"And you want me to tell him his mother is taken mighty bad, and that he's needed at home just as quick as he can get there," Ward had repeated soberly. "All right, Bill, if I see him, I'll tell him."

Ward could guess what that little phrase, "Needed quick," meant. "They're poor as Job's turkey, Ben," old Timmons, his friend, had told him. And now, Billy Scott's needed pay was in a crooked tinhorn's pocket, and Billy himself was lying over there, stretched on a slab. . . .

THE PIANO player was working back into that shuddery death song again. Ward studied him somberly. He had heard of this pathetic remnant of a man. Crazy Tom and his mad melodies were quite an attraction in these roaring, cattle trail camps.

A government bull train had picked the twisted creature up, so Ward had heard, somewhere out in the Panhandle. The Indians had been working on him. The freighters had found him, reeling along, naked, chanting, gone utterly mad. Very likely that was why his torturers had not finished their gruesome work. Indians, Ward knew, stood in superstitious awe of the insane.

The freighters had brought him in, and he had lived, somehow. He could not even remember his name. Somebody had christened him Crazy Tom Smith. In a saloon, one day, they had discovered that he could play a piano, although how he managed it with those mutilated hands was a wonder. But that was how he earned his living now—if you could call it a living. Scraps, dregs of drinks, contempt . . . these were his portion.

They said too, Ward recalled, that Crazy

Tom's broken brain had one other queer streak. He would tell the truth. Always, even when it meant he would be immediately punished for something, he would tell facts as they were. It was as though his sufferings had shattered all a normal man's independence and self-protective instincts. He would do as he was told. But he would not lie, even to save himself.

The cards flowed crisply through Ben Ward's long fingers, and he began to lay out solitaire. Absorbed in somber thought, he paid little attention to the men drifting past. He lifted his head only when the music, with a startling wail, broke suddenly.

A big man had come swiftly through the swinging doors, to catch the piano player by the back of the neck. He shook him now, as a terrier might shake a rat, and his voice flared in the silence.

"You damn, crazy coot! What's the idea playin' that kind of stuff in here! I'll slap your jaws off!" He drew back his free hand.

Ben Ward, getting to his feet, stopped him. "I wouldn't, Kiernan," he said in a soft, chill voice that somehow carried.

"Why, you—" John Kiernan twisted with an ugly snarl. Then, a startled, wary look showed on his marked face. He stood almost paralyzed while Ward moved slowly over. His eyes flicked about the room. He let Tom go, his big hands tensing.

"Your nerves must be troubling you, Kiernan." Ben Ward stopped, with a little, placid gesure. "What's wrong with the gentleman's music? A little macabre, perhaps but I never heard better piano playing in my life."

He saw the surprised, grateful look in Crazy Tom's sunken eyes, and John Kiernan's angry glare. But he knew that Kiernan wasn't going to force the issue. Kiernan was no coward, but neither was he a fool.

This, Ward knew, wasn't just a matter between himself and John Kiernan. There were others in the room, silent, and listening—Texas men, trail drivers and cowboys who took kindly neither to the killing of a comrade nor the mistreatment of a cripple. John Kiernan fattened on them and their kind. But they wouldn't swallow everything. He knew it.

John Kiernan shook himself, and summoned a quick, false smile. "Yeah, you're right, Ben," he said, just a little too loudly. "This killing tonight's got me upset. It was me or him, but, by heaven, I hated to do it! I'm sorry, Tom. Go on and play. But make it something cheerful, can't you? After all, this ain't a morgue."

He turned, shouting to the barkeeps to set one up on the house. The tension broke, and men came trooping up for the bribe. But, when Kiernan swung around, he saw the tall gambler was still standing there, looking after him with a faint, chill smile. Crazy Tom was playing again, something lively this time.

"Come on, Ben, have a drink with us," Kiernan called. "You ain't holding what a man couldn't help, against him, are you?"

"I just had a drink, Kiernan." It was odd, how that voice of Ward's carried, without seeming loud. "I dropped in because I'd heard you had some real card games here. But I'll be going."

"Hold on!" Stung, John Kiernan stretched a swift hand. "If it's real card action you crave, you've come to the right place," he bragged. "We'll accommodate you. Monte, here—"

"Don't you risk playing yourself any more, Kiernan?" Again Ward's voice was utterly without inflection. But it got over.

With a barking, angry laugh, Kiernan set down his glass. "If you got money enough to make it worth my fooling with you, mister, I'll show you plenty about gamblin'!" he flared.

Without comment, Ward led the way to the table by the piano.

"Table stakes, Kiernan?" he asked coldly, and counted out a thousand dollars in gold. "All right. Let's see your money."

FOR THE first few hands, John Kiernan played with a hot recklessness, and lost. He had to call time out to get more money from the bar till. After that, he tightened up and made it more of a contest. Kiernan had not been bragging too much when he had intimated he could show almost anybody things about poker. And yet, despite his best efforts, he continued to lose.

He began to get sullen and irritable. Luck was against him, but, thus far, Kiernan had not dared ring in any crooked stuff. The raw, marked cards and double dealing he and his house men employed would be deadly dangerous to try against this noted gambler. And, while there were subtler ways to cheat, they took time to rig, and he hadn't that

time. Finally, with a reckless impulse, he called for a new deck—marked.

It was Ward's deal. He broke the seal, tossed out the joker and let the cards riffle idly through his fingers before shuffling. Deadly tense, Kiernan waited. There was a stingy gun in his vest, and his fingers gripped the table edge a scant two inches from it. He thought he knew what Ward was looking for. That shifting, flickering effect in the patterns on card-backs could betray even the most cleverly marked cards.

But, without a sign, Ward shuffled. Kiernan drew a tiny, relieved breath as he cut This tinhorn wasn't as sharp as he had heard, he thought contemptuously. But he changed that opinion promptly when he picked up the cards Ward dealt him. Black aces and eights! The dead man's hand!

Kiernan hadn't seen a thing wrong with Ward's dealing, but he sensed instantly this wasn't just chance. And to make it even plainer, Ward was discarding his own hand.

"Your deal, Kiernan," he murmured, in that same soft, toneless voice that might mean anything. And then: "You say this boy. Scott, claimed he was cold-decked?"

John Kiernan glared through red-rimmed, slitted lids. He knew Ward was mocking him now. A black, furious hatred surged through him, and yet with it was a clammy chill. John Kiernan knew about the derringers Ward carried up his sleeves, and he had seen the lightning gun-speed of those long hands. It came to him suddenly that he was very close to death.

With an inarticulate snarl, he gathered up the cards, lefthanded, and contrived to spill them clumsily on the floor. Cursing, he called for still another new deck, a straight one this time.

Afraid of this icy-eyed, soft-voiced gambling man, Kiernan played badly. His bluffs didn't work. His cunning seemed to have deserted him, and all his luck with it. He lost, both on his own deals, and on Ward's.

At the piano, Crazy Tom was obediently playing lively tunes now. But the gay melodies didn't help Kiernan's feelings. Sometime around midnight, he lost his fourth straight big pool, and whirled with a blasting curse.

"Damn you, Tom, I can't hear myself think!" he all but screamed. "Stop that poundin'! Get away from that piano or I'll kick you away!"

"Wait a minute, Kiernan," Ben Ward broke in softly. "I'm enjoying the music. However, I will admit your pianist has more than earned a rest." He smiled at Crazy Tom, spoke to him. "Will you allow me to buy you a drink in small repayment?" And before Tom could answer, he turned, lifting his voice. "Bartender! Bring a glass of your best bourbon for Mister Smith—or anything else he may prefer."

CRAZY TOM didn't wait. Kiernan had told him to get away from the piano. With a hunched shuffle, he went over to the bar. The barkeep hesitated a second, scowling at Ward's back, then filled a glass with cheap whiskey. Crazy Tom drank it, and shuffled away into the night. The game went on.

It was nearly four o'clock when Kiernan pushed back with a curse. His hands were shaking a little. "Well, that's all the cash in the house, Ward," he said thickly. "If you'll take my IOU until the bank opens in the morning—"

"No IOU's, Kiernan." Ben Ward shook his head, and began to gather up the stack of money before him. "I put up cash and I expect cash. If that's all . . ." He shrugged, then smiled coldly. "But, of course, if you're still not satisfied and can raise more money in the morning, why I'll give you your chance. Just now I think we'll both do better to get some sleep. Shall we say, then, we adjourn until about seven o'clock this evening?"

Kiernan didn't answer. In a dead silence, Ward pocketed his winnings, nodded courteously to the tiny knot of onlookers still remaining, and went out into the dark, deserted street.

The hard-faced lookout lifted his left eyebrow in a little, chill question, and Kiernan shook his head savagely. "He'd kill you!" he snarled. And then, to the stragglers: "All right, gents, we're closing. Git out."

The sleepy bartender crowded them out, locked the doors and began to extinguish the lamps. Raw, poisonous rage in his eyes, John Kiernan glared at his lookout.

"That gent took me for eight thousand dollars!" he grated. "Damn him! Damn him to hell. Why, I never bucked such luck in my life!"

"Maybe it was because he was playin' out a dead man's string, boss," suggested the lookout uneasily. "Billy Scott was settin'

in that very chair, remember? And he was winnin' so steady you had to—"

"Shut up!" Kiernan stopped him with a savage oath. Lids slitted, he stared at the vacant chair and at the piano beyond it. With a sudden grunt, he got up and went over to the piano.

"Sit in Ward's chair and hold some cards like you was holding a hand," Kiernan commanded harshly.

"Why, boss?" The lookout squirmed uncomfortably, but obeyed.

Kiernan shifted a tinsel picture from a far wall to a spot over the piano. He sat down on the piano bench, shifted the picture again. He laughed, with sudden hard exultancy.

"Holdin' an ace, three tens and a jack, ain't you?" he snapped. "By God, when he comes back, I'll be set for him! Look! The picture makes a mirror, and Tom, sitting at the piano, will be able to see every card in his hand. All Tom will have to do is tip me off by playing a few notes for a signal. Like this." Kiernan touched the keys.

"But, hell, boss, Crazy Tom ain't got sense enough to do that!" the lookout protested. "And besides, the way Ward was honeyin' him—ain't you afraid—"

"Tom's got sense enough, and he'll do what he's told." Kiernan straightened, with a fierce grin. "I'll honey him to a different tune, if he don't! I'll beat him to death! You know where he sleeps? Well, go get him, bring him back here right now! He likes to play death songs so damn well, does he? I'll learn him a few to play while I take that dirty tinhorn for a killin'."

AT TEN O'CLOCK in the morning, Ben Ward was in Burying Jim Mordan's. The cadaverous undertaker was telling what he knew about Billy Scott. It was precious little. There had been only a few pennies in the dead cowboy's pockets, and no addresses or anything else to tell where kinfolks or friends might be reached.

"I've sent up the trail, to try and catch Bill Timmons," Mordan added. "But if I don't hear from him, well, I guess the town pays for plantin' the boy on the back of Boothill."

"The boy doesn't go to a pauper's grave," corrected Ward grimly. "Hold the body until you hear from Timmons. But if you don't hear, I'm standing the cost of a decent burial."

"You're a friend of the deceased, then?"

"He was a friend of a friend's, you might say." Ben Ward nodded curtly. "Well, if Timmons does come back, tell him I want to see him. I'll be either at the Cattlemen's Hotel or the Oasis."

Precisely at seven o'clock, chill and immaculate, Ward again entered the Oasis. Kiernan was waiting for him.

"I'll let you have your same lucky place, Ben," he hummed. "But, by heaven, if I don't bust that run of luck of yours tonight—"

Kiernan won the first pool, and the second. The third he dropped out, when Crazy

Tom signaled that Ward was holding a flush. A guarded glint of satisfaction crept into his hard eyes.

He had been a little afraid Crazy Tom wouldn't be able to handle it. But Tom was doing all right. He was tipping perfectly. It had been necessary to scare him properly, of course, and to make him practice for hours.

On the fourth hand, Ward cupped his cards cautiously, gave them one swift glance, and then let them lie, face down, while he lit a cigar. Tom could signal nothing. Kiernan took a chance that Ward was bluffing that pat hand, and learned different. But his chagrin was tempered. At least when he couldn't see, Tom wasn't lying about it. Even if he learned only every second or third hand, why that still was a tremendous advantage.

But Kiernan didn't learn even every third hand. And, sometimes, when he did, it was too late to do much about it. Ward's luck was still running in that amazing streak. Hand after hand, he held unbeatable cards, and he cupped them close. It was madden-

ing. As it had last night, once again, Kiernan found it getting his goat.

That thin chill smile of Ward's didn't help any, either. Losing, getting just enough tip-offs to make him wild, Kiernan sagged into an ugly silence. Wasn't this tinhorn ever going to get careless? Wasn't he ever going to give an opening to smash him? Just one red hand, that was all Kiernan wanted.

About ten o'clock, the break came. It was Kiernan's deal. Eyes narrowed, he watched Ward pick up his cards, two at a time. Over at the piano, Crazy Tom's rambling tune changed, guardedly indicating a pair. Then the same bar again. Two pair. Kiernan looked at his own cards, and held back a savage grin.

"Hell, this chicken-feed playin' is a waste of time," he snarled, and pushed out two hundred dollars. "Let's see if you got the guts to really gamble some."

"You call two hundred gambling?" Ward grinned. "See you. And I'll just play these." He leaned back, yawning.

"Well, I'll draw one," said Kiernan thickly. He glared at his cards. Over at the piano, Crazy Tom was softly repeating his tip. Two pair. So Ward was bluffing again, taunting him. John Kiernan bit down hard to hold back that bleak exultancy, and pushed out a thousand.

"You see that, gamblin' man?"

"See you and raise a thousand." Ward counted it out—too casually, Kiernan thought. And Ward was overdoing it, turning placidly now to wave at a tall cowman who had just come in.

"Oh, hello, Bill Timmons!" he greeted. "Just a minute till I finish up with Kiernan here, and I'll be with you."

Finish up with Kiernan! Trembling with rage and eagerness, Kiernan counted his pile. He had just enough left to cover. He shoved it to the center.

"Call, damn you! I've got a full."

"You have?" Without emotion, Ben Ward began to drop his cards, left-handed. Two kings, and then a seven. Snarling triumphantly, Kiernan started to reach for the pot. "Wait!" said Ward's chill voice, and two more cards dropped. It was another pair of kings. He had four of a kind!

WITH a furious, bursting oath, John Kiernan started to leap to his feet, but stopped. Ben Ward's right hand had moved, just a little, and death was staring him squarely in the face, John Kiernan knew. He'd be dead before he could signal the lookouts. And he had no squawk coming anyway. He'd dealt this hand, had forced the betting himself. He'd been double-crossed by his own man.

"If that's all the money you have, Kiernan, I presume the game is ended again, for the night." It was Ward speaking, chill and precise. "However, if you're still not satisfied, and can raise more money, I'll be glad to give you another chance. Shall we say, at seven o'clock tomorrow evening?"

Kiernan didn't answer. In a dead silence, Ben Ward pocketed his winnings, nodded to old Bill Timmons and led the way out. Only then did John Kiernan look at the piano player. Crazy Tom was still playing, softly, aimlessly. For along two or three minutes, Kiernan just sat there, motionless. But his eyes were like windows into some black, raging hell.

Across the street, about then, in the funeral parlor, Ben Ward was handing Bill Timmons a pile of bills and gold.

"That's for the expenses here, Bill," he explained tonelessly. "The rest is for Scott's people. You know where they live, so see they get it. Tell them it's money he won. He would have, I think, if he'd had a fair chance."

"But I don't get it, Ben." The cowman shook his head bewilderedly. "Why should you do this? You never even saw the boy alive."

"No." Ben Ward was staring into space. "But, living or dead, we need friends, Bill. There was a time when if I'd had a friend—perhaps—" He broke off, and intuitively, old Bill Timmons knew the gambler was looking far back into the locked past. Memories, secret and bitterly tragic, were hidden there.

"You're a funny gambler, Ben," said Timmons softly. "The squarest one I ever—"

"There's no such thing as a square tinhorn, Bill," Ben Ward cut him short. His mask was on again and his voice was flat, chill. "We're all crooked. I've just taken John Kiernan for better than twelve thousand dollars, all because I caught him off guard. He was still scared of trouble for the raw deal he handed Scott. In a way, you might say I picked up what Scott should

(Please continue on page 110)

TRIAL BY FIRE

By HAL HAMMOND

SOFTLY as a whisper, they threaded their way through the scraggly underbrush that covered the bottom of the narrow gorge. Ahead of them the sheer canyon walls abruptly blanked out as the chasm made a right angle sweep. But there would be more of the canyon ahead. Behind them —that was something else.

Behind them was death. An end that would be swift if the bullet or the arrow found a vulnerable spot. Slow torture otherwise.

They made an odd pair, these two. One was young. Only a boy. The down on his chin had yet to acquire the stiffness of a beard. Clyde Hanley had joined Colonel Dearborn's troop to fight the Indians when he was only sixteen. That had been but a few short months before. Stout, he was, for a lad of sixteen. Bright blue eyes beneath a mass of tousled yellow hair that curled like strands of spring wire below his campaign hat.

Sergeant Icicle Grotten, a grizzled veteran of more than a score of Indian campaigns, lived up to the handle old troopers had given him. A cool, emotionless, battle-scarred soldier who, so the tales went, had never feared man, Indian or devil in all of his life.

But Clyde Hanley was scared. Scared to death. That feeling gnawed at his insides so hard that at times it made him sick. He felt that way now. How he wished he could take these things as coolly as Icicle Grotten.

It had been two days since they had left Colonel Dearborn's troop completely surrounded by the Utes. Their objective was Fort Dailey and reinforcements that would

"Reckon they've fired the brush," Sergeant Grotten said drily.

Up the side of the flaming canyon the two men crawled . . . and with them went the last shattered hopes of Troop C.

drive away these mountain-bred savages before it was too late. Two days. To Clyde Hanley the memory of those two days was like a flame in his mind. It seemed more like two weeks. Much more.

Deep in this canyon where the sun couldn't penetrate the shadowed air was cool. Even so Clyde wiped one hand across his forehead, feeling the sweat come away cold to his touch. He stared at the sergeant, whose swarthy, burned face showed not a sign of moisture. If only the sergeant could pass on to him but a little of that detached, emotionless feeling of his. . . . Clyde gritted his teeth. He hadn't been afraid while the Utes carried on their vicious attacks. The fear hadn't hit him until he and Icicle had silently slipped away from their encircled friends.

Two days, hiding by day, traveling by night, with their enemies constantly near, was sapping the youngster's will. What made it so much worse was that Clyde had the feeling the sergeant knew he was scared. Knew it and was filing away in his mind the fact that he had picked a coward for a companion. A yellow-back on a mission that had no place for any one but a man with guts. Clyde swallowed hard. Never by any word had the sergeant let it be known how he felt, but those ice-cold eyes which had more than once shown a trace of warmth toward Clyde had not thawed a particle in the last twelve hours.

SUDDENLY Icicle stopped, sweeping up one horny hand for silence. He listened carefully, his sun-blackened face as stony and still as a statue. Finally he relaxed, pulled a plug of tobacco from his pocket and bit off a chew.

"Think we foxed 'em. Don't think they've figgered out yet that we headed up this canyon."

"Hope not," Clyde answered. He wanted to run. Now was their chance. For two days he'd wanted to run. But then Indians had been all around them. Now there were Indians only in their rear. No longer was it necessary to be so careful. Clyde shifted his rifle to the crook of his other arm.

"Now we can make some time," he suggested hopefully.

The sergeant shook his head. "Surprise you how sounds travel down one a these here canyons. Any Injuns on our back trail would sure pick 'em up. We'll speed up a little but we gotta be careful. Our main job's to get through alive so's we can get reinforcements for Troop C."

More than once as they moved along Clyde glanced upward along the almost vertical face of the gorge, his eyes traveling up and up until they reached the top so far above.

"Take a mountain goat with wings to climb that," Icicle said with dry humor.

"Yeah," Clyde answered. "Ever been in this canyon before?"

"Not this one." The sergeant spat, covering a small lizard with expert precision. "Been in a lot of 'em. Sometimes they turn out blind. Kinda hated to take this one but peers like the Utes didn't leave us much choice."

They continued on their way, keeping hidden in the dense undergrowth that filled the floor of the canyon. It was slow going, but it was either stay hidden or take a chance on the Utes spying on them from the crest of the canyon wall. That, in this narrow gorge, would be fatal.

Directly before them was the sharp bend that broke the back of the gorge. With a vague dread Clyde snaked his way through the last few feet of underbrush to get a clear view around the bend, Sergeant Grotten's words about box canyons sharp in his mind.

One brief glance ahead gave him good cause to remember those words. For perhaps half a mile the vertical walls paralleled one another. There the canyon ended. Nothing but a sheer cliff rising upward toward the sky with wind-wracked pines scattered along the upper edge that resembled split and blackened match sticks. Perhaps, in ages past, there had been a waterfall there. Now there was nothing but a vast expanse of rock weathered by the heat of the sun during the few brief hours that its rays penetrated this split in the earth's surface.

The sergeant stopped. "We're in a mess," he commented quietly. His lined, angular face held nothing but unreadable composure as his alert eyes carefully studied the rocky face of the gorge. First on either side of him. Then directly ahead.

"Have to find a way up," he said. From around his lean waist he unwound a slender rawhide thong. "Reckon we'll need this. We'll find the best place to climb out. Then

we'll wait for dark. Redskins could sure spot us easy on the cliff face."

Slowly they moved forward, carefully scanning the rocks. There were places where a man could climb part way. Places near the bottom that were seamed and rubble-lined for heights varying from twenty to forty feet. But wherever they looked there were stretches of thirty feet or more between the base and the top where the face of the cliff was smoothly unbroken.

"You stay here, Clyde," Icicle said finally. "I'll foller our back trail an' scout around. Back there a ways there was two deep gashes that led into this here canyon. One on each side. Might could be a way in one of 'em." He disappeared quietly into the brush.

CLYDE felt panic bite hard at his insides. With difficulty he fought it down. Once more he carefully checked the cracks and crevices along the canyon's walls. Was that a place they had missed up there ahead?

His pulse beating hard with the thought, Clyde slowly pushed his way forward until he was directly across from the place where he had figured they might work their way to the top.

He studied its possibilities. There might be a chance. However, a hundred feet above there was a serraded outcropping that prevented him from seeing what might lie above it for perhaps the next thirty feet. They might be able to work their way around that bulge. But could they make it from there? It looked like their only chance unless Sergeant Grotten was successful in finding a better one.

The gorge lay deeply in shadow when Sergeant Icicle Grotten returned, his jaws moving in slow precision around his tobacco cud.

"Might be able to get up one a them side canyons," he said, "but we can't chance it. Them Utes know we're in here."

"How do you know?" Again panic pulled hard at Clyde's belly muscles.

"Smoke signals," Icicle answered laconically. Back aways on top the canyon wall. Reckon they figger they got us. They'll try to burn us out. Could be done easy enough." His brief gesture took in the dense, almost tinder-dry undergrowth in which they were hidden.

"What if we did manage to get up the face of the cliff? Wouldn't the Utes be waiting for us at the top?"

Sergeant Grotten shook his head. "Them two side canyons will hold 'em back. Don't think they'll try to cross 'em. Not when they figger we can't get out of here, anyhow."

"When do you think they'll try to burn us out?"

"Most any time," Grotten said casually.

Clyde wanted to scream. How could this hard-bitten old soldier take it so unconcernedly. *Burned alive.* Blood dripped down Clyde's chin where his clenched teeth had bitten into his lips.

Sergeant Grotten stared at Clyde briefly, the look in his eyes unreadable. Once again Clyde had the feeling that the sergeant was sorry of the choice he had made in the man to accompany him on this mission. That bitter thought steadied Clyde a little but his voice was shaky.

"There's a spot we might make it." He indicated the place with a hand that quivered slightly.

Thoughfully, the sergeant studied it. "Reckon we might. Depends on what's up above that outcrop. I must've missed that afore."

Was that just a tinge of respect that Clyde detected in the old soldier's voice. He wasn't sure. Probably just his imagination.

"No need bein' careful any more. Reckon here's where me an' Betsy part company." Sergeant Grotten laid his rifle down gently on the ground. "Let's go," he said.

The first fifty feet wasn't so bad. Clyde looked down. It seemed such a long, long way. And they had just started their climb. It was at least another fifty feet to the bulge. *And above that?*

Clyde's thoughts abruptly shifted. Could that be the smell of smoke in the air?

"Reckon they've fired the brush," Grotten said dryly.

At this height the canyon was lighter. Clyde looked over at Icicle Grotten. The sergeant's face had a grayish cast. Could it be that he was afraid? Clyde felt foolish at the thought. What would the sergeant fear? He wasn't scared of anything.

"Let's get on with it," said Sergeant Grotten. "Never did like climbin'."

A half hour later they had worked their way around the base of the bulge. The smell of smoke was strong, now. And smoke was billowing lazily around the sharp bend in the gorge. Soon the flames would be visible,

(Please continue on page 111)

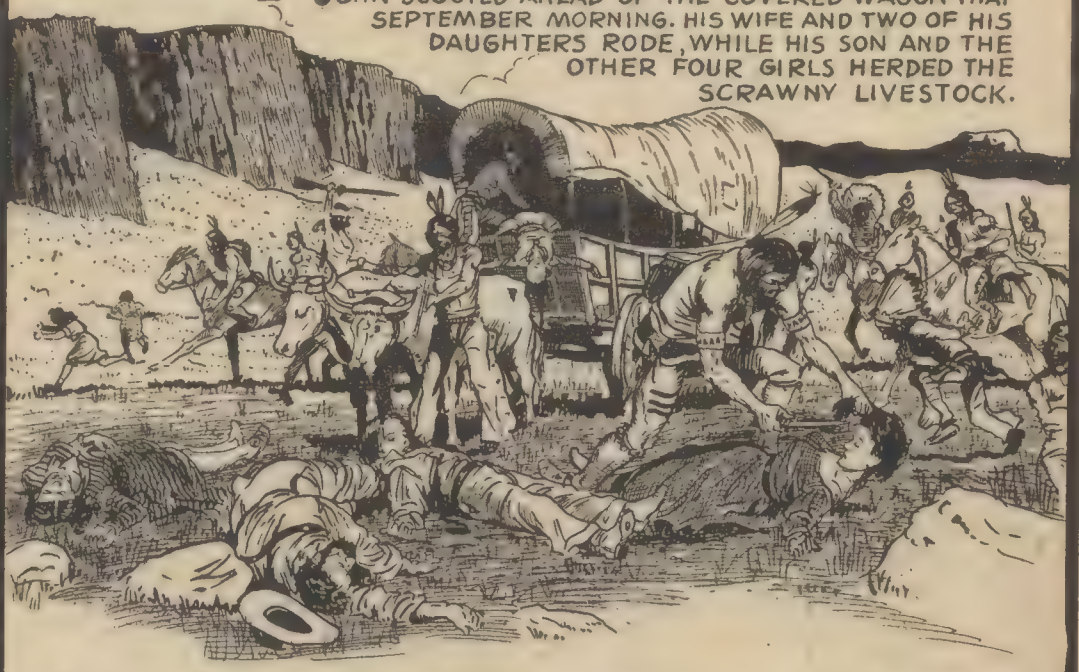
TALES of the

by LEE

COVERED WAGON MASSACRE

THE CHEYENNES WERE ON THE WARPATH IN THE FALL OF '74, RAIDING INTO KANSAS, AS JOHN GERMAINE PRODDED HIS WEARY OXEN ALONG THE OLD STAGECOACH TRAIL TOWARD FT. WALLACE. IT HAD BEEN A LONG TREK FROM GEORGIA TO THE PLAINS OF KANSAS, AND COLORADO WAS STILL MILES BEYOND.

JOHN SCOUTED AHEAD OF THE COVERED WAGON THAT SEPTEMBER MORNING. HIS WIFE AND TWO OF HIS DAUGHTERS RODE, WHILE HIS SON AND THE OTHER FOUR GIRLS HERDED THE SCRAWNY LIVESTOCK.



IN A DULL THUNDER OF HOOFS, THE WARPARTY STRUCK. JOHN, THE BOY, AND THE OLDEST GIRL DIED MERCIFULLY UNDER THE FIRST VOLLEY. A TOMAHAWK SPLIT MRS. GERMAINE'S SKULL. A BULLET DROPPED ANOTHER GIRL AND A WHOOPING BRAVE SNATCHED HER SCALP.

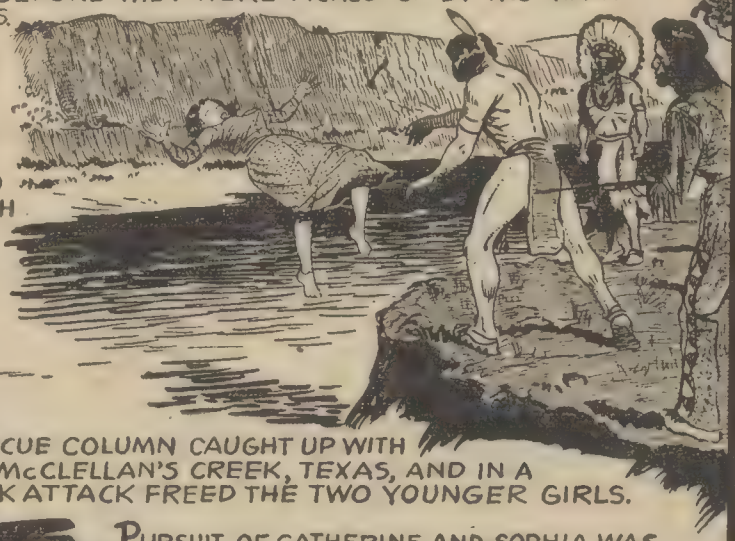
SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD CATHERINE RAN SCREAMING AWAY, AN ARROW IN HER HIP. A YOUNG CHEYENNE CAUGHT HER, JERKED OUT THE SHAFT AND SWUNG HER UP BEFORE HIM. OTHERS SEIZED SOPHIA, 13, AND THE YOUNGER GIRLS, ADELAIDE AND JULIA. AFTER LOOTING THE WAGON, THE MARAUDERS GALLOPED AWAY WITH THEIR CAPTIVES.

SCOUTS REPORTED THE MASSACRE AND PURSUIT WAS ORGANIZED.

OLD WEST

THEIR CAPTORS SOON ABANDONED ADELAIDE AND JULIA AS TOO YOUNG FOR WIVES. SOMEHOW THE CHILDREN MANAGED TO SURVIVE FOR OVER A MONTH BEFORE THEY WERE PICKED UP BY THE MAIN BODY OF CHEYENNES.

CATHERINE REFUSED TO MARRY A BRAVE AND WAS FLUNG INTO THE RIVER. INSTEAD OF DROWNING, THE PLUCKY GIRL SWAM TO THE OTHER SIDE, WHICH SO IMPRESSED THE INDIANS THAT THEY DID NOT KILL HER. A SULLEN BUCK SURREPTITIOUSLY DREW A BEAD ON SOPHIA, BUT HIS RIFLE MISFIRED.



IN NOVEMBER, A RESCUE COLUMN CAUGHT UP WITH THE CHEYENNES AT McCLELLAN'S CREEK, TEXAS, AND IN A SURPRISE DAYBREAK ATTACK FREED THE TWO YOUNGER GIRLS.

PURSUIT OF CATHERINE AND SOPHIA WAS RELENTLESS BUT UNSUCCESSFUL. THEY FEARED THEY'D BEEN FORGOTTEN UNTIL FRIENDLY INDIANS LOCATED THEM AND SLIPPED THEM A MESSAGE OF HOPE.

IN MARCH, THE CHEYENNES HAD HAD ENOUGH AND SURRENDERED THEIR CAPTIVES. AT LONG LAST, THE FOUR GALLANT GERMAINE GIRLS HAD THE SATISFACTION OF POINTING OUT 75 INDIANS WHO HAD TAKEN PART IN THE MASSACRE AND THEIR OWN ILL-TREATMENT.

CATHERINE & SOPHIE GERMAINE
FROM A PHOTO OF 1875

78-192

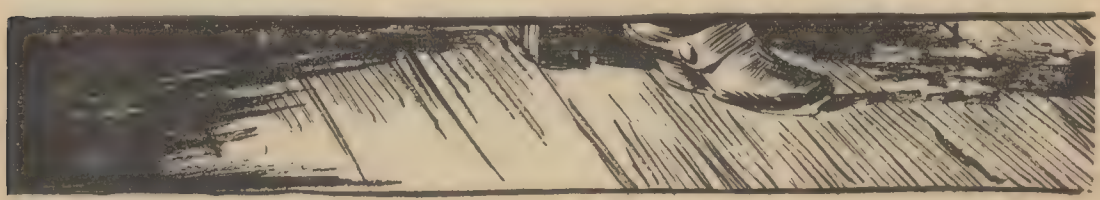
CHAPTER ONE

Gunhand Army

HE HAD the face and the build of a fighting man. From the ranch house window, Lee Blythe sized him up. She approved the straight, proud way he sat his saddle as he rode up to the bunkhouse. He was wide-shouldered, tall, in his early twenties.... He'd do.

Others like him had ridden in during the last two months. They'd found places on the payroll. There'd be a gunhand's job for this one, too. Sul Parton would sign him on.

● He stretched out a long, thin arm and . . . murmured broken words. . . .



FIGHTING PAY!

Blazing Border Country Novelette

By RAY NAFZIGER

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As the big stranger on the steeldust bay gelding rode out of sight behind the bunkhouse, Lee Blythe's gray eyes turned away, fixed on a distant mountain range across the Mexican Border. Two months had passed since her father had been brought back to the Circle B from those mountains shot to death by Juanito's band of rustlers and bandits. For two months now her brother Bob had been held captive in Juanito's little fortress on top of Picacho Negro, the small black peak that stood out against the purple haze of the mountain range.

Lee Blythe could never get her father back. But she could get Bob—and would! Ransom had failed, her offers disdainfully rejected. The American and Mexican governments had politely turned down her appeals for help. There had been one thing left to do. And Lee Blythe had done it. She had sent out word for a guncrew, at fighting wages. She had declared open war on the Mexican bandit leader who went by the little boy's name of Juanito.

Already, with Sul Parton as leader, Lee Blythe's force of fighting men had made two sallies across the Border into Juanito's territory, raiding, stealing his cattle and horses, attacking his men—anything to bring him to terms.

The girl's dark, tortured gaze shifted sharply back from the mountains. The big man on the steeldust bay had stopped at the bunkhouse for barely a minute. He was riding straight toward the main house. They must have told him that Sul Parton, who did the hiring, was expected back at any minute; but evidently he did not care to wait for Sul's return. Or maybe he had a curiosity to see the girl who had challenged a Mexican bandit-rustler.

In his colorful cowboy garb, he made a striking figure on his horse. He looked like the kind of man they needed just now; undoubtedly he'd be hired when Sul got back. Within a few days, Lee Blythe and Sul Parton would be starting their little army on a raid which they hoped would end in the capture of Juanito's headquarters on the black mountain. Until then, they wouldn't be turning away recruits.

LEE could hear the man's steps on the patio, then his knock on the door of the living room. She crossed the big room, which she had kept comfortably masculine for her father and brother—with antlered heads, beamed ceiling, an enormous fireplace of curly quartz, little islands of cougar and bear rugs. She opened the door.

The stranger was even taller than he had looked on his horse; and, when he entered, Lee noticed that his shoulders all but filled the doorway. Under his dark, ruffled hair, his face was deeply bronzed. In contrast, his eyes were a clear blue. Those eyes, she observed, were filled with the same reckless light she had found in most of the other men who had ridden to join her army.

"Miss Blythe?" he inquired in a voice that was surprisingly soft. "My own name is not important, but it's Hallett—Jeff Hallett. I was sent by Dick Cressy. He said I might find work here."

Dick Cressy was one of the half dozen friends who had directed to Lee Blythe men who would qualify for the girl's fighting force.

"Work?" she repeated. "If it's range work, I'm afraid we have enough help already."

Hallett smiled a little, and it lighted up his face, made him look almost boyish. "I'm not particular about the kind of work. Dick Cressy did mention there might be some use for my guns."

Lee eyed Jeff Hallett speculatively, and as he returned the gaze, his smile widened. The girl bridled. She decided she didn't like this big Jeff Hallett; he was too sure of himself, too inclined to think the world revolved around him. Yet he was the sort needed for the expedition into Juanito's domain.

"Something amuse you?" she snapped.

"Yeah, you," he drawled. "I was expecting Miss Lee Blythe to be a different sort of person. Been hearing stories of a lady hellion down here fighting a one-woman war against Juanito. You don't fit the stories. You're too young, too pretty...and too sweet."

The girl's first impulse was to flare up. She had been living in a tense atmosphere of guns and fighting, and she was on trigger edge. She checked her anger, however. Petty, personal feelings should not be allowed to interfere with getting another fighting rider.

"I know little of the stories that may be floating around about me," she told him coolly. "There are only two things I want—to get back my brother, and to smash this Juanito and make our ranches and people on this side of the line safe. He killed my father, and he holds my brother prisoner.

I've offered him everything we possess for Bob's safe return. I appealed for help to the American and Mexican governments. The Americans said they couldn't cross the line; the Mexicans are too busy with a revolution. There was nothing to do but help myself. . . . Within a few days, my men and some of my neighbors are crossing the Border, and either we settle with this Juanito for good or we won't come back."

"Open war against him, eh?" said Hallett gravely. "Did you ever think that crossing the line with this force may raise trouble between your country and Mexico? The Mexicans might consider it an armed invasion of their territory. Wars have been started on less."

most of his life in Mexico and had adopted some of the mannerisms of that country. At times he even resembled a Mexican.

"This a new man for our bunch?" he asked, eyeing Hallett as he might examine a horse for purchase. "Cressy sent you, did he? We're offerin' high wages, all the cartridges you can shoot, and all you can steal down across the Border and bring back. You'll do, I guess, if you don't scare too easy at flying lead."

"I savvy there'll be some risks," Hallett said quietly.

Parton nodded dismissal. "You're hired. Tell 'em to fix you up at the bunkhouse."

As Hallett turned toward the door, he looked at the girl again. His glance seemed

When the drifter named Hallet tackled Lee Blythe for a job—any kind of job—no one stood in more need of a hand—any kind of hand, so long as he could swing a gun—than that desperate, orphaned boss of the Circle B.

Lee Blythe's mouth became a hard, straight line. "I can't help that. I can't let my brother be held prisoner by that beast."

Lee Blythe, with her gray eyes, her pretty features and thick bronze sheen of hair, was more than just another pretty girl. There was force to her, a firm resolution which better fitted a man than a slim wisp of a nineteen-year-old girl. She was suddenly curious about Hallett.

"No one else who came to volunteer to fight," she remarked, "mentioned trouble between the American and Mexican governments. All of them were interested only in the wages I would pay. Just what made you bring it up?"

Before Hallett could make an answer, the outer door opened—and Sul Parton strode in.

Parton, the leader of Lee Blythe's fighters, was two inches under six feet, well built, dark, all quick-flowing energy. His black eyes always seemed to burn with some inward fire.

As Parton faced Hallett, Lee contrasted the two. On the surface, Jeff Hallett was easy-going, with a world of reserve strength beneath his calm. Parton, high-strung, was the sort of man who lives each moment intensely. Parton she had never been able to figure out completely. The man had lived

to say he regretted the interruption to their talk.

After the newcomer had gone, Sul Parton strode quickly to a window to watch Hallett, who, with the dislike of cowboys for walking, was climbing into his saddle to cover the short distance to the corrals.

"I don't know about that hombre," stated Parton thoughtfully.

"You mean you don't think he's a fighter?" asked Lee. "I disagree. He's probably killed half a dozen men and is wanted by a dozen sheriffs."

"He's fighter enough," admitted Sul. "But he's not like the others that drifted in here to hire out their guns. We've got to keep our eyes peeled for spies. We're all set, Lee, to pull Juanito's tail feathers. My scheme's working. The big herd of your cattle I've been gathering down at the Playa as bait to draw out Juanito has done the job. Tonight Juanito, leaving just a few guards at that Picacho Negro fort of his, is heading with all the rest of his men for the Border. Fifty to one, he'll jump the herd tomorrow morning and stampede them south."

He stopped to roll a brown paper cigarette. "We'll let him have the cattle, but stay on his heels all day, making him keep all his force with the cattle. Tomorrow night

he'll have to camp, ten or fifteen miles this side of the Picacho, and while he's camped, we ride on to grab the place from the few men he left on guard. Your brother's as good as back. Slick scheme, don't you think?"

He flung his cigarette into the fireplace. Crossing to the girl, he took her hands unexpectedly and stood smiling down at her. "Lee, I warn you, when I've brought your brother back safe, I'm going to expect a sizeable reward."

"You've been paid pretty well for what you've been doing, Sul," said Lee.

"Money means nothing to a man who has an eye for beauty," he said lightly. "I've seen plenty of girls—Americans north of the Border, Mexicans south—but none of them could hold a candle to you. The reward I'm going to ask is you, Lee. Ever since I first saw you, I've dreamed of marrying you."

She withdrew her hands from his, stepped back. "Sul," she said, "you know I can't think or talk of anything like that now. There's only one thing I think about—and that's my brother!"

"There's always time enough to think about love, too," said Sul. "Since this trouble came up, you've changed, Lee. You've become hard, almost like a man. But no matter—I want you, and I'm going to have you. Nothing will stop me."

"I tell you I won't talk of it now," she returned. "Sul, drop it."

For a moment Parton hesitated, frowning, and then he shrugged his shoulders. "*Bueno.* I'll drop it. I can afford to wait." His white teeth showed in a smile that held little merriment; for a moment it seemed to Lee to hold half a threat.

LEE had never felt quite sure about Sul Parton. A few months before her father's death, he had come up from Mexico to engage in some sort of a deal in Mexican cattle. After her father's murder and Bob's capture, he had volunteered to act as agent for Lee Blythe in trying to make a deal with Juanito. When that had failed, he had taken charge of her fighting forces, drawing a good salary for the work. He had been active enough, going on trips into Mexico, for weeks at a time, trying to get back Bob.

Outside came a hammer of hoofs, beating toward the house. There was always the sound of hoofs, entering and leaving the Blythe ranch headquarters, day and night alike. Tot Wiggs, a little oldster who served as messenger for Parton, swept up on a lathered, slim-legged black horse. Flinging himself from the saddle, he burst into the room without knocking.

"Sul," he burst out, "just got a tip that a man Cressy sent down here to join us is a government man. Big fella on a steeldust bay. He's a Border man that's been working on smuggling cases, and a hardcase who gets what he goes after. Name of Hallett. If he finds out what we're up to, it may mean troops bein' sent in to stop us from crossin' the line."

"You don't have to tell me what it means," Sul snapped, glancing toward the corrals where Jeff Hallett had disappeared. "I thought there was something phony about him. Spy, is he? We'll show him that's a plumb unhealthy business 'round here. It's 'bout time for supper—we'll take care of him while he's eatin'. I'll set him between Givens and Toro, and when they grab his arms, I'll have Nick Drough pump a couple bullets into his back."

"Sul!" Lee Blythe's shocked voice showed the horror the girl felt. "Kill him—when he's only doing what he's paid to do? That is plain murder."

"What else can we do?" growled Parton. "We can't afford to fool with him, 'specially just when we're movin' across the Border."

"There'll be no killing him, I tell you," said Lee Blythe. "Take him prisoner. When we've started for Mexico, then you can turn him loose."

"Takin' that Jeff Hallett alive is the same as takin' a poison-tooth tiger," put in Tot Wiggs. "I heerd plenty about him. He's chain lightning with guns, reg'lar hell-on-wheels. He ain't goin' to be took alive."

"Send him up here," ordered Lee Blythe. "Tell him I want to talk to him. I'll see that he puts aside his guns, so he can be taken without anyone being hurt."

Sul Parton eyed the girl keenly. "Kinda gentle with a spy hombre, ain't you? Don't you know he might stick you and me in the pen for crossin' the line with a big bunch of armed men? They give long sentences for invadin' a friendly country. But you're the boss. I'll send him up, and I'll be here with three or four men, to do the takin'—after you get him shucked of his guns."

CHAPTER TWO

Border Delilah

IN THE ranchhouse courtyard, which was in effect a little garden about which the rooms of the house had been built, were plots of grass, shrubs, dwarf trees, and a small fountain which splashed into a tiny pool covered with lily pads. There were paths paved with tile of a rich warm red. As a small girl, Lee Blythe, with the liking of most children for red, had never tired of looking at those tiles. She could not bear them now. The color reminded her too much of the blood that had been spilled along this part of the Border.

After supper, three heavily-armed huskies, summoned by Parton, came from the bunkhouse. Nick Drough and Ike Givens were two of Parton's most trusted men; the third was an immensely powerful Mexican called Toro. Drough and Givens hid behind a projecting house wall, while the Mexican crouched back of a strip of bushy hedge. Parton, waiting just inside the living room door, would make a fourth.

"Soon as you get him to shed his guns," Parton told Lee Blythe, "we'll come out and jump him. I'll give a whistle as a signal. And you better slide outa here quick. The action may turn into gunplay."

"But there will be no need for guns," protested the girl.

"There won't if he's sensible," said Sul, and shut the door softly.

Jeff Hallett was striding up from the bunkhouse, bareheaded, whistling a little tune.

He found Lee sitting in one of the patio chairs, made of willow with a seat of laced rawhide covered with cushions of striped serape cloth.

"You sent for me, Miss Blythe?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and waved him to a chair. "Mr. Parton and I wanted to talk over some things with you."

The girl's green dress was the color of new sage growth in the spring; it harmonized with her gray eyes and her hair, in which the last rays of sun were leaving bronze lights. Hallett's eyes held frank admiration for her, and she knew it would be easy to persuade him to shed his armament.

"Friendly pair of guns you have," she commented ironically, looking at the bone-white stocks of the twin six-shooters that he wore at his hips.

"They have been friendly to me," he said with a little grin. "But maybe not so friendly to others."

The etiquette governing an armed visitor compelled him to remove his weapons when entering a house. This courtyard was not strictly part of the house, but since Lee Blythe evidently did not like the looks of his weapons, he unbuckled the cartridge belts, and laid them on a bench a little distance away.

Lee flushed, thinking of the woman in the Bible, Delilah, who had betrayed Samson to his enemies. Delilah, however, had betrayed a man for a bribe; she was doing this to save Jeff Hallett from the death Sul Parton would have dealt a spy. Jeff Hallett would probably not excuse her on that ground. Still what difference did it make what he thought? He would be released in a day or two, and she would never see him again.

"I'm glad of this chance for a word with you before Parton comes," said Hallett. "Your idea, as I gather it, is to take your private army across the Border and try to get into Juanito's Picacho Negro hideout. This Juanito is a shrewd fox and somewhat of a mystery. No one seems to know much about him, only about what he does. If he should get you cornered below the Border, there'd be no one to help you."

"We know the risk we run," said the girl.

There came the crunch of a stick under the boot of one of the three men in the courtyard....

JEFF HALLETT heard the sound. He glanced about suspiciously, and his eyes went to his pair of guns some ten feet away. If he reached them, Lee realized, and put up a fight, blood would be spilled over the red tiles of the patio, dyeing them a darker, more ominous hue.

There was only one way to prevent that—get those guns before he did. Lee was nearer the bench, and she sprang up and rushed across to it. Simultaneously, Sul Parton's whistled signal came, and there was a rush of men. Toro, Drough and Givens hurled themselves at Hallett as Parton emerged from the doorway.

Hallett turned to meet the assault, sending out a granite fist that caught the nearest

man, Toro, squarely in the jaw. The Mexican dropped as if he had been struck by a slaughter axe.

Drough threw himself at Hallett's legs in a low diving tackle, while the husky Givens lashed out with a fist like a ham. Hallett dodged both Drough's arms and the hefty swing of Givens, and pivoted to trade blows with the latter. Then, from behind came Parton, swinging his six-shooter as a club.

"Don't, Sul!" cried Lee. "You might kill him!"

Hallett, unaware of the danger from Parton, smashed hard rights and lefts to Givens' face, sent the man reeling back. Drough tried to catch him around the legs again, and Hallett stepped back, lifted a boot in a hard kick that caught Drough in the jaw.

It was then that Parton struck down savagely with the six-shooter. He aimed the blow for Hallett's head, but it glanced off his skull and smashed down on a shoulder.

Stunned by the blow to the head, crippled by the shoulder smash, Jeff Hallett staggered backward blindly, trying to hold his footing. For a moment, he was too dazed to get himself into motion again.

"Shoot him, Sul!" yelled Givens.

Parton leveled the six-shooter at Hallett's head.

Lee Blythe was holding the holstered pair of Hallett's guns; she whipped one from its holster now and covered Parton.

"Sul, don't shoot," she warned him. "Hallett, give up before they kill you."

Hallett, weaving on his feet, ignored Parton's gun and looked at the one Lee Blythe held. "Go ahead—finish the job," he spat out, thinking she was threatening him. "I was warned this was a camp of killers and renegades, but I didn't expect to see one of them wearing skirts. I was sent in here to help you—but don't let that stop you from shooting."

Sul Parton moved in, cautiously continuing to cover Hallett. "When we need your help, fella, we'll let you know," he snarled. "Give up, hombre. We ain't goin' to hurt you, if you're good. Just keep you tied up till we get started for Mexico."

Hallett, fighting off dizziness, buckled at the knees and slowly went down. Drought brought a rope and turned Hallett over on his back, tying his wrists securely behind his back.

"Is tying him up necessary?" Lee demanded, still holding one of the guns.

"You bet it's necessary, with a panther like him," said Parton. "If he'd got hold of a gun, there'd be two or three of us layin' here dead before we got him dragged down. That wallop of his almost busted Toro's jaw."

Hallett was able to stagger to his feet. "I'm warning you," he addressed Lee Blythe, "if you go into Mexico on this expedition, you'll regret it."

"That'll be our funeral," snarled Parton. "Shove him along, you fellas. Lock him up."

WITH Drough and Givens on each side of Hallett, they marched the prisoner off toward the bunkhouse. Toro, still dazed from the blow from Hallett's fist, followed. Lee Blythe stood looking after them, trying to down a strong sense of shame at her part in the ugly affair.

Wearily, she went into the living room, still a little shaky from the scene in the peaceful little courtyard.

Jeff Hallett believed the worst of her. He had even thought she was going to kill him.

Lee tried to tell herself that it did not matter what a stranger thought, but his accusing words kept coming back. She was sick of violence, of gunmen and guns and killings. She thanked God that it would be only a few more days before all would be decided, one way or the other.

A clatter of hoofs brought her to a window. Three men were riding away from the horse corrals. One of them was Jeff Hallett, with his hands tied behind him. Nick Drough was leading Hallett's horse, and Ike Givens was following. The trio were heading south, toward the Border.

A little cry welled from Lee Blythe's red lips. As surely as if she had heard the order given, she knew Jeff Hallett had been condemned to death. They were not going to keep him prisoner, as they had promised. Parton had sent the toughest pair on the ranch to take him to the line, where his body, with half a dozen bullet holes in it, would be left for the buzzards.

Lee ran from the house at once, hunting Sul Parton. She found little Tot Wiggs lounging by the horse corrals.

"Where is Sul?" she demanded.

"Set out for town just now," said Tot, with a wave of his hand to the west.

Considering that Sul always rode at a lope or a gallop, Lee knew there would be no time to catch up with him and get him to countermand the order to kill Hallett.

"Drough and Givens?" she inquired.

Wiggs cackled. "Sul told them to take a little moonlight ride down to the Border."

Lee saddled her horse. There was a six-shooter in a holster fastened below the horn; for months she had never ridden out unarmed. In a feed bin, she kept a pair of Levis and a man's shirt. Trading these for her dress, she swung into the saddle to take the same trail on which Hallett, Givens and Drough were riding.

Stars were blossoming in the sky as she spurred over the little hill above the ranch. Over a trail that grew steadily rougher, she kept her reckless pace, increasing it to a racing speed when the moon pushed up to give light.

She ran into the three men suddenly. They were grouped in the shadow of a little cliff. Apparently they had pulled up when they heard the clatter of her pony's hoofs. Drough and Givens dismounted to stand with their guns in their hands. The prisoner was still in his saddle.

"You, eh?" said Drough harshly. "You're takin' chances, young lady, ridin' up on men this time of night."

Lee ignored that. "You know and Parton knows that it was agreed this man was to be held prisoner for a few days and then turned loose!" she said hotly.

"Sul changed his mind," Givens replied, with a laugh.

"I haven't changed mine," Lee told them. "And I want him brought back."

"*Nada,*" said Drough. "Sul gives us our orders. You better go back to the ranch, little pigeon," he went on insolently, "and let Sul run the show. What's this gent to you, anyhow? You act kinda sweet on him."

The girl kept a tight rein on her anger. She was up against a stone wall in trying to argue with these two. They had reholstered their weapons and now stood in the moonlight, grinning at her, thinking she was helpless.

The fingers of her right hand touched the butt of the six-gun in the holster beneath the saddlehorn. She gripped it, whipped it out from leather.

"Sul Parton isn't boss of this outfit!" she called sharply. "You take my pay and ride my horses. And on a showdown, it's my orders you'll take. Put up your hands and move away from those horses." The barrel of her gun leveled on them.

Caught flat-footed, they lifted their hands shoulder high.

Jeff Hallett spoke up then. "Be careful of these two," he warned her.

"I'm watchin 'em," she said grimly. "Step out, Drough and Givens, and keep your hands up."

THEY moved out, but as they came toward her, they were slyly stepping farther apart, making it hard for her to keep the six-shooter trained on both of them. But she remained coolly watchful, and when Nick Drough suddenly lunged toward her, she shot, at his legs. Evidently, from the squall of pain the man let out, she scored a hit.

Givens turned to run for his horse, probably intending to use the animal as a barricade. Lee jabbed spurs into her mount, caught up with the man, and shouldered into him, knocking him from his feet into a clump of prickly pear.

Rolling, roaring curses, Givens got to his knees and dragged his sixgun from his holster.

Lee turned her horse, but she knew she would be too late to stop the enraged man from firing. From the side, Jeff Hallett spurred his mount violently. By the pressure of his knees, he guided the horse straight toward Givens.

As the horse loomed above him, Givens screamed. He fired, sending a bullet whistling past Hallett's shoulder. A hoof knocked the gun from Givens' hand, another struck his head glancingly, taking all the fight from him.

Lee Blythe swung from her saddle. She picked up Givens' gun and disarmed Drough, who was trying to staunch the flow of blood from the bullet hole in his leg, altogether indifferent to the outcome of the battle.

There was a knife in the saddle bag behind her saddle. Lee got it and cut the ropes that bound Jeff Hallett's wrists. He dismounted to help her with the two men, using the pieces of rope to tie, Givens, and then making an examination of Drough's wound.

"Not hurt bad," he said. "No arteries punctured. But he'd better be taken to a

doctor after I bandage him. This other bird can go along with him."

Neither man protested when Hallett lifted the bandaged Drough into his saddle and untied Givens. Muttering threats, the two left the trail to head west toward the nearest town.

After the pair had gone, Jeff Hallett turned to Lee Blythe. "I've been thinking hard things about you, when I should have known better. You saved me from being found with a couple of bullets in my back—and risked your own life interfering with those two. I wish I could make some return. I'd like to help you, if you could trust me. But I guess you can't trust anyone."

"I can't trust a man who works for the government and will try to stop us from going across to rescue my brother."

"You're wrong on that. I've got no orders to keep you from going across. No one has any intention of stopping you. I was sent here to advise you not to go and to keep watch on what you do—and that's all. You won't have a chance against this Juanito. His fort at Picacho Negro is strong enough to hold off a small army. Lee, you'd better delay this expedition."

"It's too late now,"she said. "And I wouldn't stop it, anyway. It's our only chance to get back Bob—my brother."

Hallett came close to her, laid his hands gently on her shoulders.

"Lee Blythe," he said, "you're just a kid, trying to go against your nature and be a rough-tough man. I'd do anything I could for you. If you do go into Mexico, I'm going, too. I guess Parton wouldn't want me with your gang, but I won't be far away. Will you believe, Lee, that I want to help—and that you can trust me?"

It seemed to Lee Blythe that she had found in this rider on whom she had looked as an enemy, the only man she could wholly trust.

"I trust you, Jeff Hallett," she said impulsively.

And then all the strain and grief she had been through during the past months became uncontrollable. A flood of tears came. She found comfort in the arms of Jeff Hallett. Cried against his shoulder, as if she had been a lost child that he had found wandering in the desert. He let her cry there, until the storm was over, when he lifted her into the saddle and rode with her until they could see the dim lights of the ranch below them.

And as she rode the remainder of the way alone, it came to Lee Blythe that she had found not only a man she could trust, but one she could learn to love....

CHAPTER THREE

Moonlit Ambush

BACK at the ranch house, Lee Blythe went to bed, to a disturbed, restless sleep. All night the still air carried the beat of hoofs coming into and going away from the ranch. Neighbors, whose herds had been riddled by Juanito's raids, were coming with their riders to join the Blythe expedition.

Long before daylight, men at the corrals were making ready to ride, loading pack mules, saddling mounts and cutting out a bunch of horses to be taken along.

Lee dressed in riding garb. Getting a rifle from the antlers rack in the living-room, she hurried to the corrals. Sul Parton had returned; he was giving sharp-voiced orders. When he saw Lee, he at once crossed to her.

"When I gave orders to get rid of that damn spy," he growled, "I didn't intend for anybody to interfere."

"You gave me your word you'd hold him as prisoner," she replied coldly. "You seem to forget, Sul, that I'm the boss here. Either you understand it now or you can ride out. We can get along without you."

Sul Parton stared at Lee Blythe, shocked. There was more steel in her than he had suspected. And she meant what she said about letting him go if he wanted to quit. The realization brought Sul Parton back from the brink of an angry explosion. He backed down.

"All right, Lee," Parton said smoothly. "Let's not quarrel. I've been wrought up, planning and keeping this bunch of hardcases in line. All I'm thinking of is wiping out Juanito and getting Bob back for you. Let's forget about Hallett."

Lee Blythe nodded, but still some faint doubt of Parton lingered.

An hour later they were riding out in a long column, driving their bunch of extra mounts ahead of them, heading for the herd which was held on the big playa below Escudero Peak. Juanito's men, according to the information Parton had received, would

jump the herd at dawn. The American riders with the herd had orders to fall back as soon as they were attacked, letting the raiders have the cattle.

Reaching the comb of a high hill overlooking the playa, the little force dismounted. Parton's scheme was to make no effort to stop Juanito from seizing the herd; on the flat, open land of the playa, they would have no chance of ambushing the rustler-bandit's superior numbers.

As gray crept into the sky, a sudden burst of shots sounded below, and dimly they could see a band of riders swooping on the herd, stampeding it south. Juanito had risen to the tempting bait which Parton had spread for him.

The American herders fell back safely to a rocky little hill, and came to join the main force after Juanito's men had the herd strung out for the Border.

By noon the cattle had crossed the Border and started along a winding foothill canyon, which led to the mountain range in which lay the Picacho Negro fortress. All during the afternoon, Parton kept the main part of his force concealed, to avoid alarming Juanito into abandoning the cattle and retreating. The remainder he sent in small sniping parties to harry the Mexicans.

Toward sunset Juanito made for a horseshoe-shaped slope where he could bed down his herd, with a mountain at his back, and establish his men in a good position against a night attack. A few miles away Sul Parton made camp.

Parton rode out after dark on a lone scout to inspect Juanito's camp. On his return he reported that the whole Mexican force was out on guard duty, ready to repulse any attempt to recapture the herd under cover of darkness. The way was clear for a surprise attack on Picacho Negro.

In their camp, the Americans ate supper and took a few hours' rest, since they were not many miles from Picacho Negro, which they intended to attack an hour or so before dawn Some of the men slept; most of them sat about the fires yarning.

At midnight they roped fresh mounts from the band of horses they had driven along, and started out, traveling by a route which would miss Juanito's camp by several miles. An hour later the moon found the column riding through a canyon bottom among little groves of giant cacti, with high rock walls rising precipitously on each side of the trail.

At Sul Parton's suggestion, Lee Blythe had fallen to the rear of the column. She yawned a little as she rode along. She had had little sleep the night before, and there would be none at all tonight. Trailing the column, she was aware that a rider was falling in beside her. They were in the shadow of a high cliff, but she knew it was Jeff Hallett. He had said he would not be far away, and he had kept his promise. Her heart quickened a little.

"Still following us to do your spying?" she inquired lightly. "Or do you like our company?"

"Both," he drawled. "But mostly, it's that I like your company—more than I ever liked the company of anyone else." Then abruptly he became grave. "I'm afraid you're running into danger, Lee. This Juanito is a fox. I've been back watching his men, where they bedded down the herd. They rode away south just after dark, leaving only two or three men on guard with the cattle."

"You must be mistaken," Lee returned, troubled. "Sul Parton scouted the camp and said Juanito's men were all there, placed to fight off a night attack."

"Parton must have been badly fooled. You're liable to find Juanito in full force waiting for you at the Picacho. Better find Parton and tell him."

"He wouldn't believe it." Disturbed more than she would admit, Lee glanced at the column ahead, moving just then out of the narrow canyon into a moonlit open flat.

"You'd better think of your own safety," she told Hallett. "When we ride through that moonlight, some of the men will recognize you. And Parton will—"

Her voice was drowned by a thunderous roar of gunfire that sounded like one enormous clap of thunder. Immediately following, came a pandemonium of yells and more shots.

WITH horror, the girl saw some of the Americans reeling in their saddles, falling from them. Horses were going down. The whole group was thrown into wild confusion. Fire poured in from both sides and the front.

Full realization of the disaster came to Lee Blythe. They had ridden into an ambush. Juanito had taken the main part of his force to intercept the Americans. She

brought out her rifle and spurred forward to join in the fighting, but Hallett came up alongside and seized the bridle reins of her horse.

"No," she cried. "I belong up there—with them. I brought them into this."

"It was Parton who brought them," said Hallett. "And it is their fault for allowing themselves to ride carelessly into a trap. You can't help them, Lee. Only those who can fight their way back here will escape. They're coming now."

A strung-out line of riders thundered back from the moonlit open space into the shadowed stretches of the canyon. Some, who had lost their horses, had doubled up to ride with companions; others were holding wounded comrades in their saddles. Joining them, the girl and Hallett raced down the canyon, with the bullets whining over their heads.

A mile below, in the mouth of a little side canyon where they could make a stand if necessary, they halted. The guns above had stopped, and there was no sign of pursuit. A bable of talk arose. So deadly had been the trap that a third of the force Parton had led into Mexico had been wiped out. Parton himself was among the missing. He had been last seen a little before the attack, scouting ahead of the column.

As they were taking care of the wounded men, as best they could, a single rider came racing belatedly down the canyon. It was Sul Parton, hatless, with a makeshift bandage about his head.

"Thank God, you're safe, Lee!" he exclaimed as he saw the girl. "A bullet grazed my head, almost knocked me out. Too bad it didn't kill me instead of one of those other poor devils. It's all my fault, but that cussed Juanito could give a marked deck of cards to a fox and beat him. Who would have suspected he would ride ahead to lay this trap for us? But we've still got a chance. I know old Don Rodolfo Rodriguez, at the Hacienda Santa Clara, ten miles to the west. He's suffered plenty from Juanito, and he'll come with a bunch of men to help us. If he does, we'll still give Juanito a battle. He thinks he's got us licked."

"What does it look like?" asked one of the men sourly. "But I'd be willing to go up against Juanito with just what men we got if we had a chance."

"We'll have that chance when I get Don Rodolfo and his men," said Parton. "Hole up and wait here. Juanito won't be looking for you. All he wants is to get off with that herd of cattle. How many will volunteer to stay?"

The answers were not unanimous. Fifteen men volunteered to remain. The others said they had had enough; they would return across the Border with the wounded.

"Fifteen's plenty with what I can bring from Santa Clara," said Parton. At once, he turned his horse and spurred west. A little later those who were quitting rode out north, leaving the remainder, including Lee Blythe and Jeff Hallett, waiting in the mouth of the side canyon.

Lee Blythe sat silent, disconsolate. Slim chance remained of ever getting into Picacho Negro to rescue Bob. Sul Parton had been outmaneuvered. She puzzled over that. Parton had a good head on him; he wasn't the sort to slip up.

As she mulled it over, there came a clatter of hoofs along the canyon bottom. Three Mexicans jogged into sight, some of Juanito's men, probably heading back to the herd. The Americans raised their guns.

"Wait!" said Hallett suddenly. "We can grab those three. They'd be more help to us alive than dead. They can get us into Picacho Negro."

"How?" inquired a rider skeptically.

"By having them take us in with them as if we were their prisoners. By fast riding we can get there before Juanito's outfit. Nothing would look more natural than having these three bring in a batch of us, with our hands tied. Once inside, we'll clean up the few guards Juanito left."

"I'm danged," said one of the neighbor ranchers. "That's just crazy enough to work. And who are you, stranger?"

"He's Jeff Hallett, a government Border man," Lee Blythe explained. "And with a reputation as a fighter. I'd rather trust him than wait for Sul Parton to come back."

"Me, for one, I'll ride with him," said the rancher, and the others nodded. At once they crept through the brush, fanning out in a line to stop the three.

The trio were outlined in the moonlight, and when the Americans stepped out, rifles in their hands, the Mexicans at once raised their hands and were disarmed.

Five minutes later, with the trio tied to their flat-horned saddles, the Americans were

racing for Picacho Negro. They rode steadily through the hours. By daybreak they had come within sight of the small table-topped black cone, falling almost sheer on all sides except one, which descended to a brushy flat.

On this face of the small peak, a long building had been built of blocks of black rock. Above its flat roofs rose high parapets, loopholed for riflemen. There was one entrance in the walls, a high gate of thick cedar plank protected by a squat, round tower. The fortress-like building had been designed and constructed by a Mexican rancher in the days when the Comanches and Apaches had raided the country.

Before emerging from the brush, the Americans halted, returned to their three prisoners their empty rifles, and then connected all of their group with a long rope, apparently fastened to the wrists of each rider. After giving explicit directions to the Mexicans, coupled with threats of what would happen to the trio if they disobeyed, they started the ride up the slope to the cedar gate.

WITH one of the Mexicans leading, the other two at the sides, the line of riders rode briskly up the slope. When they came within a hundred yards, heads projected above the roof parapets. One man shouted a question.

As he had been directed, the Mexican in the lead merely waved his hand in a signal for the gate to be raised. There was no need for explanation; the ropes running along the string of Americans told plainly that the three were bringing in prisoners.

Raised by a windlass and chain mechanism, the heavy gate creaked upward. The few guards Juanito had left at his headquarters had no suspicions.

As the Americans rode through the gateway, they flung the ropes from their wrists and, with drawn six-shooters, surged forward. With Hallett in the lead, they charged straight for the men in the courtyard. Those on the roof could be disposed of later. The Mexicans were taken utterly by surprise, and before they had a chance to get into action, they were hemmed in by a semi-circle of riders. Two who tried to resist were shot; the others surrendered. After a little resistance the men on the roof surrendered also.

With the firing of not over twenty shots, the supposedly impregnable Picacho Negro had fallen.

There were dozens of rooms to the building, used as quarters for the band of men Juanito had gathered. Below these rooms were dungeon-like cellers, blasted out of the black volcanic rock. In one of these Bob Blythe was probably held, but they had no time now to look through them all.

Under threat, one of the Mexicans led the way through a low-ceilinged passageway and down a flight of steps to an iron door. Taking a candle from a niche in the wall, he lighted it. Then, from the same aperture, he took a huge key. Fitting the key to the lock, he swung the door open, revealing a little dungeon-like cell, utterly dark and musty, with the smell of walls untouched by sun.

From a cot in one corner a bearded man, thin to the point of emaciation, stared at them. Plainly he was an American, but his eyes gazed dully at them.

Lee Blythe had accompanied the party. She stood staring for a moment, and then with a single choked cry, "Bob!" ran forward and threw her arms about the prisoner, trying to lift him to a sitting position.

Whimpering like a frightened child, her brother shrank away from her. Hallett lifted Lee Blythe gently to her feet.

"He's gone through too much hell to know you," he told the girl, who had begun a broken sobbing. "He'll be all right—just needs food and sunlight."

He picked up the pitifully light body and carried Bob Blythe through the passageway into what was evidently the living quarters of Juanito, a long sunny room that looked out on the central courtyard. The prisoner was barefooted, dressed in filthy clothes. He had been half-starved and badly beaten.

Lee hurried to heat a little milk; bringing it in, she fed it to her brother with a spoon. He took it with a childish eagerness, still not identifying his sister.

One of the Americans came in, to tell Hallett that a big band of riders was moving toward them from the north—Juanito and his force.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bandit Masquerade

HALLETT said, "We can't make it back to the Border with Juanito following us. Now that we've got the buzzard out of his nest, our only chance

is to keep him out. He'll have at least fifty or sixty men, while we assay fifteen. Long odds."

Out of rifle range, the Mexican force stopped, guessing that Picacho Negro had fallen into the hands of the Americans. Dismounting, they began an advance afoot, carrying rifles, keeping in the thick, dark, brushy cover.

Lee Blythe had left her brother in charge of a fat Mexican woman, and had joined the men on the roofs. The situation, as she saw, was more than desperate. Outside help could not be expected. If Sul Parton got men from the hacienda of Don Rodolfo Rodriguez and brought them here, he would have to break through Jaunito's lines to join the beleaguered Americans.

Bullets began to smack against the walls. Juanito's men gathered in a little clump of boulders and got ready for what would evidently be a rush.

The Americans reloaded their guns, and when the Mexicans suddenly burst from cover, yelling savagely, and began to race up the slope, they were ready. Shooting deliberately, Hallett and the others picked off men in the advancing line, dropping a dozen before the attack had gotten well started. The attack faltered, then abruptly the Mexicans turned back.

Jeff Hallet turned to Lee. "You see," he said encouragingly, "We could hold out here for months."

But the girl knew he was only trying to keep her from worrying. When darkness fell, their handful of men could not defend walls intended to be manned by forty or more. Sunrise would see Picacho Negro in the hands of Juanito again.

With their open attack repulsed, the Mexicans began pouring their fire on the roofs, in the hope of picking off unwary riflemen. Lee Blythe returned to her brother, to find him stirring in a restless sleep that was more stupor than slumber. Looking at Bob, the ghost of his former vigorous self, tears came to her eyes.

She looked curiously about the room which had been left in the disorder that usually is to be found in the quarters of unmarried men. Guns, boxes of cartridges, saddles, boots and other clothing had been left strewn carelessly over the floor and chairs. A bright bit of color caught her eye, a white silk neckerchief with a red heart embroidered in one corner. Frowningly, she stooped to inspect it. She had seen that same neckerchief a month before, around Sul Parton's neck.

A wild suspicion, too foolish to be considered, leaped into the girl's mind, to be put aside instantly.

A FRESH burst of shots brought her hurrying to the roofs by way of a broad outside stairway. In the distance, behind the line of Mexicans, arose a cloud of dust churned up by horses.

Two of the Americans were using field glasses. "Help for us!" shouted one of them jubilantly. Sul made fast time. He's bringin' up a bunch of Mex riders."

Lee Blythe impolitely snatched the glasses from the man and focussed them on the cloud of dust. It was Sul Parton, with some dozen riders, all Mexicans, firing hotly as they dashed forward in an attempt to break through Juanito's line. As Lee watched, one of Parton's little band clutched his saddlehorn and toppled to the ground. The others swept on.

A brave thing, the girl was thinking. Almost too brave for Sul, who had told her plainly that he would not be satisfied with a money reward for rescuing Bob Blythe. Somehow, that act of gallantry did not fit the calculating, cold-blooded Parton.

The discovery of the neckerchief in the room below came back to her. Again a suspicion knocked at the door of her mind.

"Sul's going to make it through," said Hallett, who had taken the glasses from Lee. "I'll have to hand him more credit than I've been giving him. But I don't see how he's doing it. Juanito's bunch must be poor

The Americans had opened fire, trying to aid the little band of oncoming riders. Two men had descended to work the apparatus which lifted the big cedar gate.

Lee Blythe's suspicion would not down. Into her mind flashed all that she knew about Sul Parton. Most of his life had been spent in Mexico; he spoke the language like a native. With his dark eyes and swarthy skin, he could easily be part Mexican, despite his English name. Her father had been with Sul at the time he was killed, and Bob had been with Sul at the time of his capture. Parton had seemed energetic in trying to rescue Bob, but it had been his plan which had allowed Juanito to get the big herd of shots, not to bring down more of Sul's men."

Blythe cattle. And his carelessness had been at least partially responsible for the deadly ambush of the Americans in the canyon. That carelessness could easily have been black treachery.

The suspicion in Lee Blythe became a certainty! She clutched Hallett's arm.

"Jeff!" she cried, "I can undersand why Sul's getting through so easily. Those Mexicans are only making a bluff at stopping him. The one man that dropped did a fake fall. Jeff, Sul must be in cahoots with Juanito. Those men with Parton are some of Juanito's Mexicans."

Hallett's face was unbelieving.

"Wait, Jeff, before you decide," Lee went on rapidly. "I found a neckerchief belonging to Parton in Juanito's room. Maybe I'm crazy, but if I'm not and we let his bunch in here, we're lost."

While the little group thudded nearer, Hallet considered swiftly. "You may be right," he admitted. "There's a lot that Sul has to explain about that trap last night. All right! If he set that trap for us, we'll do the same for him. We'll let him come into the courtyard—under our guns!"

LEE looked down into the small yard to which the gateway gave entrance. If Sul's band rode in there, they would be shut in by twelve-foot walls and be all but helpless.

Hallett turned to the others. "Men," he shouted, "there's doubt whether Sul Parton is loyal to us or to Juanito. We want to talk to him before he joins us. Close the back of the courtyard below. And let the gate down behind him, once his bunch has ridden through. Have your rifles ready."

Parton, followed by his crew, pounded madly up the slope, firing back at the enemy. With a final thunder of hoofs, they rode through the gateway. One man was holding hard to the saddlehorn, as though he had been wounded. Parton was still hatless, the bandage about his head.

Behind them the big cedar gate fell with a crash. Parton pulled up, looking at the heads above the parapeted wall. Ignoring Jeff Hallett, he waved to Lee Blythe.

"Had a tough time making it here," he called. "We're in for a siege, but we'll hold them off."

"I'm wondering about that," returned the

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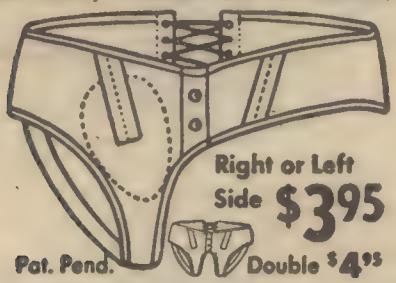

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girl coolly. "There's doubt about you, Sul. I think you might have come to help Juanito instead of us."

Parton stared for a moment, then laughed. "I guess you're joking, Lee," he remarked easily. "You can see we risked our lives to get through Juanito's outfit."

"We're wondering about that, too," she declared. "Sul, we want to ask you a few questions."

Parton's face froze in a dark scowl. "What is this?" he demanded angrily. "You accuse me of being in cahoots with Juanito? You're insane. I've been fighting him ever since your father was killed. As for these men from Don Rodolfo's ranch, they've all fought Juanito's gang more than once. I can vouch for their being loyal."

"We're wonderin'," put in Hallett, "which party they're loyal to. Sul, you and your men climb off your horses. Let's see how you look without your guns."

At this, Parton went into a blind fury. "This is too much," he bawled. "I've stood for all I'm goin' to. I hope Juanito gets in here and strings all of you up; If you don't want us to help you, we'll ride out again. Open that gate and we'll take our chances on getting back through Juanito."

"Not before we ask you a few questions, Parton," called Hallett. "We've got you covered. You'll ride out when we let you. If you're straight, you'll have a chance to prove it to us."

Parton turned to his men to mutter an order, and they shifted their hands toward their guns. But so threatening were the rifles that ringed them in, that even Parton, for all his rage, could realize the hopelessness of resistance. He calmed suddenly and shrugged his shoulders, and smilingly swung from his horse.

"I've nothing to hide," he declared. "Go want. I'll step out and let you try me."

Hallet, Lee and four men went down to open a little gate in the large one at the end of the courtyard. When Sul stepped jauntily through this, he found himself covered by six-shooters. Hallett strode forward.

Hallett took Parton by the arm and urged him into the room where Bob Blythe lay asleep. Sul did not see the sleeping man. He sat down on the edge of a table, cool, cocky

"Now, what is all this?" he asked the girl. "I can bet friend Hallett has put this non-

sense into your heads. Don't believe him."

"No," said Lee. "I'm guilty of that. I got to thinking about how you gathered half of my cattle in one herd and let Juanito steal them, and then took us all into a trap."

Parton looked bewildered. "You're really serious, are you?" he asked. "But why should I bet in cahoots with a bandit?"

"For a share in the loot," said the girl. "I admit, Sul, we've no positive evidence, except finding one of your neckerchiefs here in Juanito's quarters. It's my hunch, Sul."

"A girl's hunch, eh?" said Parton.

Behind her Lee heard a hoarse croak. Turning, she saw her brother, sitting up, staring wildly at Parton. Lee ran to him, but he would not lie down. Instead, he stretched out a long, thin arm and pointing at Parton, murmured broken words that the men could not catch. The girl, however, understood them and she turned toward Parton.

"Jeff," she called to Hallett, "Bob says that Parton is—Juanito! That he's Juanito in Mexico—Sul Parton across the Border."

"It's a lie!" bellowed Parton. Then he admitted the accusation by making a desperate lunge for a gun at the far end of the table. The men were caught by surprise.

HALLETT was the nearest to Parton. He did not go for a gun, but leaped after the man, reached him before Sul's outstretched hand touched the gun. Catching him by the shoulder, he flung him toward the side of the room. Parton turned swiftly and, as Hallett moved toward him, rushed in wildly.

Before Hallett's blows, Parton reeled back. Then Hallett stepped in, to swing a terrific clout to the side of Parton's head. Sul hit the opposite wall and bounced back. He fell limply on his face, knocked senseless.

Hallett turned to one of the men. "Tie Parton up," he ordered. Followed by the other two, he rushed outside.

There was a wild pandemonium on the roof. Before Sul Parton had quit the main force, evidently, he had left orders to start an attack within a certain time—intending, when it came, to turn on the Americans. Already, well up the slope, the girl saw a stirring sight; forty riders, yelling and shooting, coming with an impetus that seemed sufficient to carry them through the stone walls.

The little band which had ridden in with

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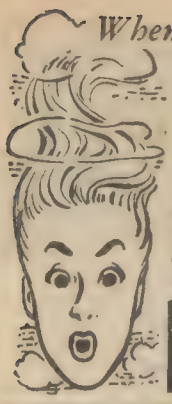

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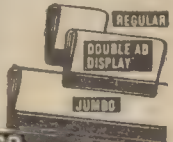

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Parton had made a break for their weapons, and the Americans had turned to dispose of them first. Hemmed in by the walls, the Mexicans had no chance.

The defenders turned to meet the onslaught of the horsemen, who were still coming up the slope at full speed, expecting the cedar gate to be lifted for them. When it stayed down and the rifles on the wall sent a hail of shot into the foremost riders, their yells died.

Men toppled from saddles; horses somersaulted, throwing riders far ahead of them. In this tangle, the rifles continued to wreak havoc, strewing the slope with men and horses. Cut to ribbons, all hope of help from their leader gone, those men who were still in the saddle spurred to get away.

In less than thirty seconds the little force of Juanito, part American, part Mexican, had been crushed. All over the slope lay the still bodies of men and horses.

Horrified by the spectacle, Lee Blythe returned to her brother. It would take weeks of careful nursing before Bob would recover from the long confinement. Sitting by his side, she thought of Sul Parton and his extraordinary masquerade, what he must have been planning. He had counted, of course, on forcing her to marry him, through his hold on her brother. Beyond that, he probably intended to use the Blythe ranch as quarters on the American side, Picacho Negro on the Mexican, to ravage this whole stretch of Border country.

When Jeff Hallet came into the room, the girl went to him, her face radiant. "You won," she told him.

Jeff grinned. "Me?" he said. "A fine job I'd have made of winning. You were the one who out-foxed the fox.

"Lee," he went on, as his arms went around her, "there'll be work here, cleaning up this mess that Juanito left, gathering all the cattle he stole from Mexicans and Americans and delivering them to their owners. I can get that job, and backing to start a ranch here at Picacho Negro. I've been wanting to quit my border work. Will you marry me, Lee, and come here to live?"

Her arms stole up about his neck, and she gave her answer with her lips. She no longer hated this Border country; all the dark horror through which she had gone was an almost forgotten dream. ✪✪✪

(Continued from page 27)

who'll be willing to tell the truth about these goings-on when decent law puts the heat on him."

It was close to noon the next day before Chris got a chance to go over to the doctor's house to see Lew and Miriam Quade. Lew was in bed, his head swathed in bandages, looking drained and ill-humored.

"Heard some shootin' last night," Lew said. "A man can't get no rest around here."

Chris told them about it, though they had heard most of it already from town gossip. "Ravel's mate's signed a full confession. A man's gone after the sheriff. This town held a kind of meeting this morning. Far as anybody knows, Ravel left no kin. With the mate's confession, it's likely you can get a attachment on the *Chief* or get it sold and collect damages. Either way, the river from here to Mill City's yours from here on, Lew. And Long Bend'll see you get set up in business and make a go of it."

Lew kept scowling, but he blinked his eyes a couple of times, and Chris knew a deep feeling was hidden there. "The things a ambitious man'll do to get ahead," he said finally and gingerly fingered his bandages. "Sis, throw away your fish pole."

Miriam followed Chris to the porch. He was thinking about his spread again, of his renewed prospects of staying in the beef industry. Of how well she'd fit up there. But he found suddenly that it was easier to tackle a Saul Ravel than to tell her what he wanted to do.

"We don't know each other well yet, Chris," Miriam said, and she smiled up at him. "We've only seen the worst side of each other's nature, the side that turns up when people get high-handed with us. That's no basis for you to propose or me to accept you on. What do we know about each other when the real pinch comes? Like riding together in the moonlight. Or dancin' to good music. How do we know what we'd do then?"

Chris nodded somberly. "No marriage ought to start out frivolous," he admitted. "Supposin' we try some of that hand-holding and stuff. Then, if it don't wear off, we can talk business."

"Agreed," Miriam said. "How soon can you locate some moonlight?" ○○○

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(Continued from page 59)

damn fools to go. I reckon that twenty thousand would buy me a one way ticket."

"Right!" Nick Trainor downed his drink in one gulp and walked from the room with Lundeen and Fulbright, leaving Matt and me facing each other across the table.

New Mexico was a thousand miles away, but as our eyes locked and held I knew that distance does not lose a friend, nor does duty performed against a man that knew he was wrong and regretted it. Matt wiped a suspicious moisture from his eyes with his sleeve, knocking his drink to the floor with the brush of his arm.

"Awkward," I said, "as a one-legged jaybird."

"You go to hell," Matt told me and he grinned.

I went out on the street, on my way to tell Bill Gifford to forget the round-up, to cancel my order for cars. Behind me I heard the sound of running feet, the swish of silk. I turned, to pull Ann Butler into the darkness of the hallway that led up to Lawyer Biddle's office. She lifted her eyes to search my expression and the fear left her face.

"Oh," she breathed, "it's all right now! I can tell by looking at you, Len Walker. When Matt went in there and the others followed I was sure some one would be killed."

"It's all right," I said. "Matt's decided to drift south for a spell. It was a kid's trick, Ann. He wanted so desperately to make himself big in your eyes. He wanted to build a house on his place fit for you to live in."

"Matt always was foolish," she said, and she sighed against my chest. "He should have known that if I wanted a man I'd live in a hogan with him."

"Yeah, you'd be that way, Ann."

"Aren't I lucky," she trilled, and all the urgent eagerness that was so much a part of her came to her face and to her body, lifting her to her toes, "to want a man who already had a good house? How many rooms does it have, Len? You've never taken me there since you built it."

I reckon that nothing hits a man harder than a glimpse of Paradise, and with no mavericks in it. It hits him more solid, although in a decidedly different manner, than it does when he has to oil up his sixgun against a friend. ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 72)

and thirty-five are to be brought in in the morning.

Among the killed are Brevet Lt. Col. Fetterman, Capt. F. H. Brown and Lieutenant Grummond. The Indians engaged were about three thousand . . . This line can and must be held. It will take four times the force in the Spring to reopen it if it be broken up this winter. I hear nothing of my arms that left Fort Levenworth September 15th. Additional cavalry . . . would have saved us much loss today . . . Every officer of the battalion should join it today . . . No such mutilation as that today is on record. Depend on it, the Post will be held as long as a man or round is left . . . Give me officers and men . . . The Indians are desperate and they save none.

Henry B. Carrington,
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That was the end of the night's festivities. Those who had no staff function hurried to their quarters to prepare their equipment for the move north. Phillips was put to bed, and the post surgeon started the long, successful fight to save the life of the man who had brought such grim news. Lights went on in headquarters and plans were laid for the arduous trip to Fort Phil Kearny.

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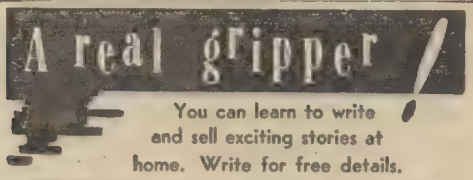

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(Continued from page 84)

have won. So I'm paying part of it back for his folks. You see—"

He whirled, sucking in a sharp breath. From across the street had come the blasting thunder of gunfire—three shots, then a scream, then another shot. Ward was through the door before the echo of that last shot had faded. He sprinted back to the Oasis.

The big saloon was in wild confusion as he burst in. There was a swarming pack of excited men around the piano. Ward tried to push through, caught a cowboy by the arm.

"What happened? Wasn't that Tom who screamed?"

"Kiernan and Crazy Tom's killed each other!" The waddy was stammering in his excitement. "I—I was standin' right there! Kiernan jumped up and grabbed Tom by the neck and said somethin' to him; and Tom, he just blatted out so's everybody in the place could hear: 'Why, I told you what he held, Kiernan! I told you by playin' he had two pair, and he did. Two pair of kings.' Then Kiernan drawed on him. Tom had a knife."

"Tom was tipping off my hand!" Lips suddenly tight, Ben Ward pushed through the circle. John Kiernan was dead. But Crazy Tom Smith, sagged over the keyboard, hands clutching his breast, was still alive. He looked at Ward with a thin, agonized smile.

"I—didn't lie," he whispered hoarsely. "It was two pair. But I was lookin' for the chance. I—Mister Ward, I couldn't go on—helpin' him cheat you. I—I'm glad. Kiernan, damn him—now this—this is for him!"

With a convulsive effort, Crazy Tom Smith turned, and his bloody hands swept the keys. He was playing—a death song, jerking and terrible—a death song for a tinhorn and for Tom Smith. The music broke with a discordant crash, and the twisted body slid down.

His face curiously white, Ben Ward leaped to catch him. Gently he lowered the little figure to rest on the bench. For an instant, there was silence. Then the gambler took off his hat.

"A better deal up yonder, Tom," he said, very softly. And, dimly, those listening knew it was a prayer. ✪ ✪ ✪

(Continued from page 87)

searing their way through the underbrush. Scarcely a quarter of a mile to go before the fire would be directly under them. Even though they were now over a hundred feet above the floor of the canyon the rising heat would be terrific. It might be more than they could stand.

CLYDE started climbing again. He was above Sergeant Grotten now. Almost to the top of the bulge, easing his way carefully, his body pressed close to the rocks. Long since he had taken off his shoes. They were slung around his neck, hanging by the laces. Clyde glanced downward. Those depths had a dizzy pull.

Grotten was motionless, glued against the face of the cliff, staring downward, his leathery face the color of an old weather-beaten bone.

He is scared, thought Clyde. He was amazed. *He's afraid of being up in the air.* The knowledge that even a man like Grotten knew what fear was did something to Clyde Hanley. It pushed his own fear into the back ground. Clyde knew what precarious heights like this could do to a man. He had seen it happen before. A man freezing onto his perch, powerless to move by himself. Even to a man with Grotten's iron will such a thing could happen.

"Look up here, Sarge," Clyde commanded sharply.

Sergeant Grotten looked upward with a start, a slight tinge of amazement showing in his eyes.

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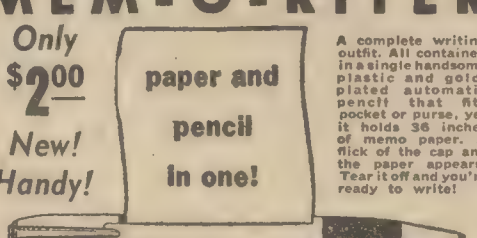

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"Now start climbing," Clyde said brusquely. "We're almost around the bulge—and we ain't got much time!"

Gray-faced, the sergeant stared at Clyde. But he didn't move.

The fire was around the bend, now. From this height the flames had a rosy quality akin to that of an orange bird in erratic flight.

There was something singularly beautiful about that fiery confusion so far below them but the danger of their position lay uppermost in Clyde's mind. He wished he knew what was above that bulge. If it was worse than this even he might not be able to make it. And Sergeant Grotten. . . .

He would have to go down and give Sergeant Grotten a hand. Clyde found that it was more difficult descending the face of the bulge than it had been going up. It was difficult trying to seek a foothold for his toes, all the while knowing that beyond that rocky projection lay an empty void. Those depths kept pulling at him. But if he hesitated, he, too, might freeze to the rock face as Grotten was doing.

Finally he lowered himself to where he could reach Sergeant Grotten. With one hand he tied the rawhide thong about the sergeant's waist.

"There's a rock up there I can tie the other end of this rawhide to," he said. "Then you can't fall. *Remember that.*"

Going up the second time was easier. He fastened the leather thong securely to the rock. "All right, Sarge," he called. "Come on up."

Slowly Grotten's clutching fingers loosened their tenacious grip. He was moving now, the pressure of his body against the cliff face giving him the appearance of a blood sucker. Clyde sighed gently as Grotten wormed his way to a point directly below him. Clyde started moving upward again.

"Don't look down," he commanded. "Whatever you do—*don't look down!*"

Directly below them it was a furnace, now. There was no chance for the heat to spread outward in the narrow confines of the gorge and so it moved upward in boiling waves almost like a wind.

Slowly they inched their way around and above the bulge. Clyde wiped the salty sweat from his eyes, hardly daring to look upward. This was the spot they hadn't been able to see from the floor of the canyon. *If*

that cliff face was sheer rock as it was on either side of the bulge. . . .

Finally Clyde forced his reluctant gaze upward. From his burning lungs his breath eased outward in a gentle sigh. They could make it.

Directly above them a pock-marked fissure knifed sharply into the rock face. Fantastic shapes resembling the snagged teeth of an ancient hag pitted the entire crevice. The rest of the way would be easy.

Twenty minutes later they were over the crest of the bluff. Once more on solid ground. Sergeant Grotten sleeved the sweat from his face. He pulled his plug of tobacco from his pocket.

"For the last twelve hours I been wonderin' why I fetched you along, Clyde," he said. "There's darn good men I've soldiered with for years, an' I could've picked any one of 'em. I got a lot a failings but I allus figgered my foresight was better than my hindsight." He smiled, faint humor glints in his dark eyes.

"Don't see any reason to change my opinion of myself. Let's get goin'. We'll make the fort now. Or do you want to give the orders?" The old devil was grinning.

Clyde grinned back at him. He felt fine. "What for?" he said. "Why do you reckon I got an old galoot like you along? Let's shove off." ✪ ✪ ✪

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